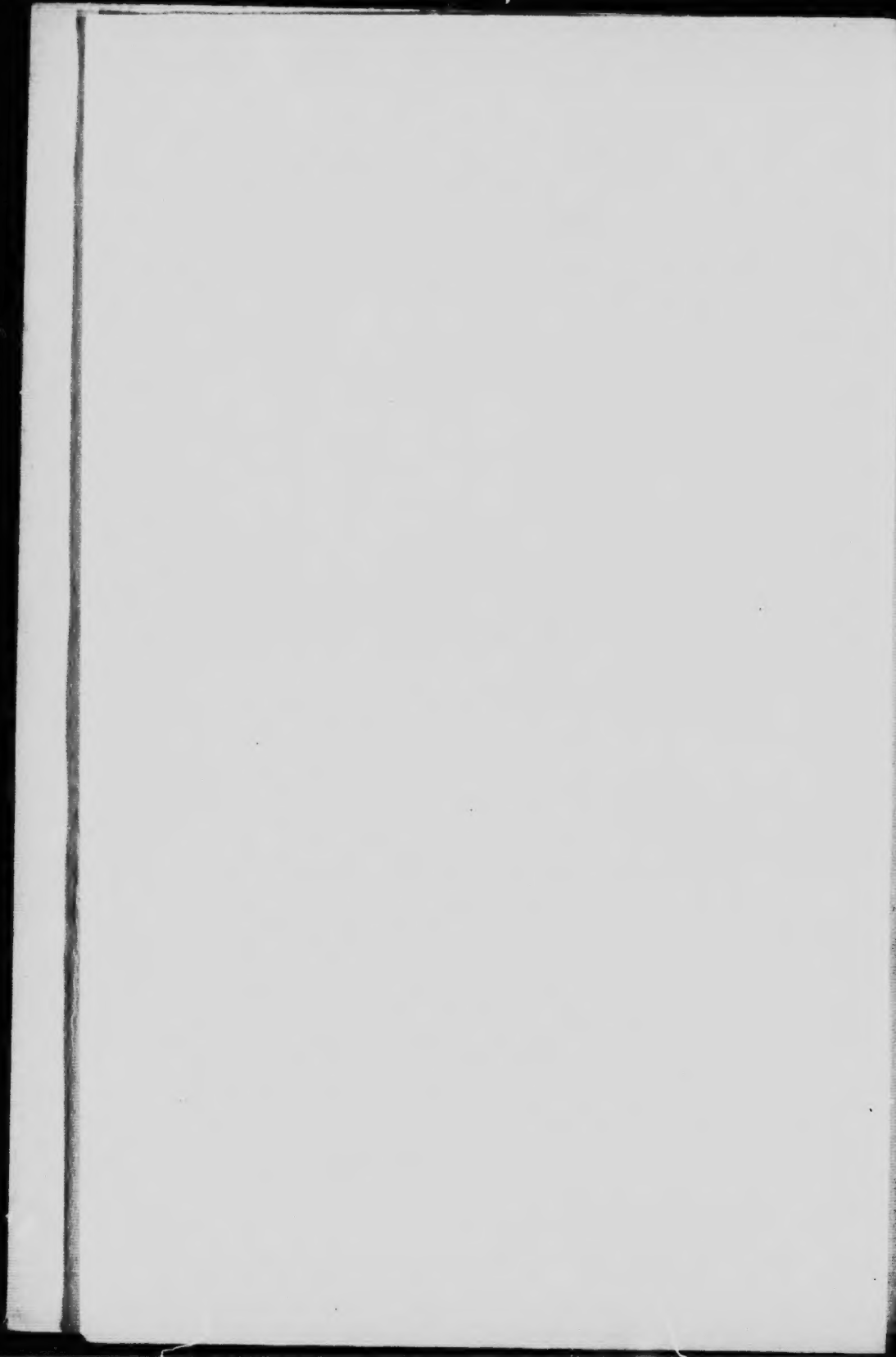




Damaris

Printed in Great Britain

DAMARIS *A Novel*

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:: :: :: :: *Savage*," etc. :: :: :: ::

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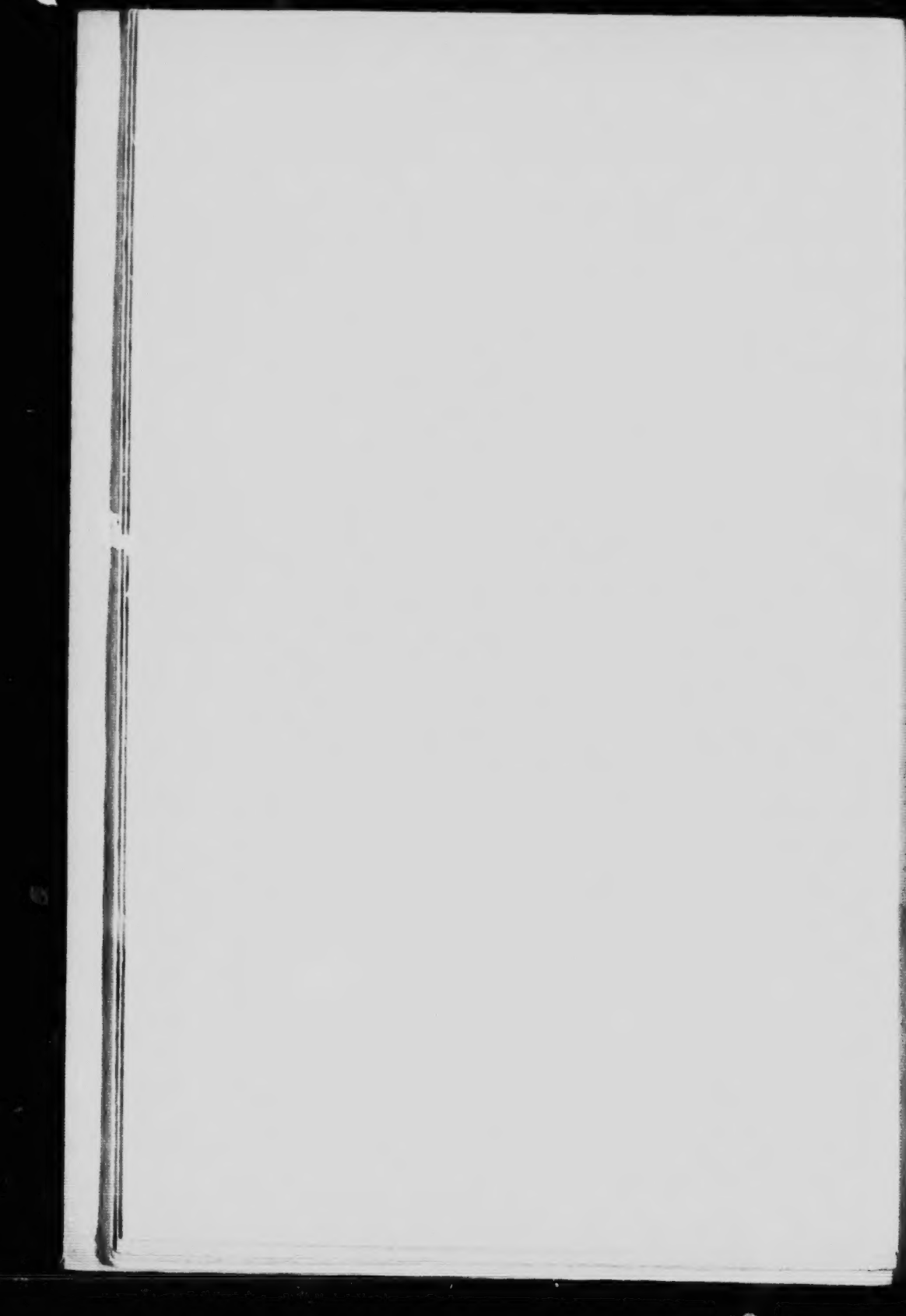
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BOOK I
FIRST LOVE



DAMARIS

I

OUT of the dim beginnings of things, from amongst confused and shifting shadow-pictures, emerged the composed, sprightly, light-stepping figure of Henrietta Pereira. Beholding it, Damaris fell over head and ears in love. She was then five years old. Whereupon her baby soul, breaking free of the chrysalid stage, spread its little wings and she became consciously and actively human.

The date of Damaris' second birth was late in March, 1864. The scene of it, a massive, square-built, ochre-coloured house in North-West India, the windows of whose many lofty rooms opened on to broad, arched verandahs as to the ground floor, and galleries as to the floor above.

Formerly the summer palace of the reigning native prince, the Sultan-i-bagh, at Bhopur, stands solitary, overlooking a tract of waste land, from behind an avenue of wide-branching tamarind trees. About half a mile distant to the right were the Cantonments, the military hospital, and garrison church—the latter, at the time in question, still in process of building. To the left, the Civil Lines, Club House and so-called "Europe" Bazaar grew into being. Facing it on the farther edge of the waste, above blood-red encircling walls, the house-roofs of the Native City—massed in brown-grey horizontal layers, pierced here and there by the blunt, stepped and carven

steeple of a Hindu temple—rose against the foot of the western sky.

Without the city gate, upon the south, where, clothed by orchards and gardens, the immense plain stoops to the river level, the marble domes and slender minarets of a mosque showed, ivory white, amid a grove of ancient trees.

Traversed by innumerable wheel-tracks and pathways, patched in places with coarse grasses and brakes of stunted camel-thorn, but presenting for the most part a bare surface of sunbaked earth and shifting sand, this uncultivated tract, the Bhutpur Maidan, constituted in 1864 a neutral zone, ranged either side which conquerors and conquered, the old civilization and the new, contemplated one another in sullen question and distrust. Across it, meanwhile, herds of mild-eyed Brahmin cattle, leaden-hued buffaloes, and hurrying flocks of stump-faced, lop-eared little goats went back and forth to pasture. Over it horses and dogs were exercised, soldiers marched and counter-marched, bands playing, bugles calling, the metal of accoutrements glinting in the morning sun. Upon it companies of pilgrims journeying to some holy shrine, or camel-drivers with their ungainly, evil-smelling, evil-tempered beasts, pitched a fugitive camp; while packs of wailing jackals scoured it by night.

In addition to servants' quarters, cook-house, stables and sundry other outbuildings—amounting in all to a fair-sized village—the compound of the Sultan-i-bagh comprised some eight acres of pleasure grounds. These had declined from their original splendour, the cost of upkeep proving too heavy a drain upon the official purse. But what they thus lost in artificial grace made for gain in apparent extent, and in an almost riotous luxuriance of vegetation.

Shrubberies ran wild. Flower-borders were overgrown and tangled. Climbing plants, throwing cables from limb to limb of the high trees, hung in curtains of dense foliage sewn with blossoms, orange and azure, crimson, purple,

or waxen in texture and moon-white. Everywhere a charm of running water and the gladness which goes with it held the place, keeping it serene and hopeful even through the fierceness of hot-weather days and nights. For the whole area was intersected by shallow conduits fed from a great well ; the primitive wooden gearing and ever-creaking pulleys of it worked by a yoke of stout, cream-coloured bullocks, who for enduring patience—in trotting down and laboriously backing up the steep walled slope to the well-head—might easily have given points to pious Job himself.

In former times, under the plum and peach trees, through the orange grove, in the sweet maze of the rose garden—this set out fan-wise in ingenious imitation of a peacock's tail—or down cool, dusky alleys, where interlacing leaves and branches spread a sun-proof canopy overhead, princely owners had disported themselves with the ladies of their households—wives and concubines—after the manner of their kind. Or—these more, or less, legitimate recipients of their favours being safely stowed inside the great house, behind screened windows and eunuch-guarded doors—had fêted some errant light-o'-love, witty, wealthy, astute and brave, deep-read in the affairs and hearts of men, bringing with her the last word of political intrigue and private scandal from the courts of Delhi and Lucknow. Or, once again, striving to whet jaded appetite and cheat the tedium of irresponsible personal power, had patronized the Liberal Arts, in the shape of conjurors, mimes, buffoons and wrestlers, professional story-tellers, players of flutes and the other instruments, and hired dancing girls with silver tinkling anklets, brought in from the bazaar.

To the end of securing greater privacy for the prosecution of such agreeable entertainment, the said princely owners enclosed the compound with a twenty-foot wall, stoutly buttressed and ochre-coloured like the house ; thus effectually circumventing any spying either from within or from without. Only in the south-eastern angle, perched above the big tank—patterned by pink water-lilies and

fringed by clumps of whispering bamboos into which the overflow of the irrigating conduits emptied—a painted pavilion, roofed with scale-shaped, bronze-blue china tiles, afforded, through jealously-barred window-spaces, an outlook across the sandy waste to the trees and houses of the Civil Lines, a reach of bistre-green river, slow-flowing between shelving banks ; and beyond, far as sight travelled, broken at rare intervals by huddled grey village or glossy darkness of isolated grove, a bright immensity of cultivated plain.

Thus, at the date of Henrietta Pereira's coming, did the Sultan-i-bagh remain, isolated, proudly impassive, and, notwithstanding change of ownership and office, materially and emotionally intact—for the Spirit of the place remained likewise, it being impossible that spirit once evoked can ever wholly die.

Nevertheless, after the passing of Native and establishment of British rule, the *genius loci* had but a starveling time of it—and that with inconvenient results. The East holds no monopoly of naughtiness, any more than the West of faith and good works. At bottom human nature, whatever the colour of its skin, is everywhere and always rather vexatiously the same. Still, as between East and West, the temperatures of vice and virtue and those voices of tradition and hereditary tendency which—whether consciously or not—races as well as individuals so actually and inevitably obey, are different to the point of enmity. Small wonder then if a psycho-physical emanation, a local spirit, brought forth and nurtured under Oriental conditions, should find itself woefully at variance with English occupation of its domain.

The poor, ghostly creature was desolate, out of touch. For the ways of these pink and white faced strangers were not its ways, neither was their curt, decisive speech its speech. Something naked and unashamed, yet, to it, incomprehensibly modest, obtained in their habits and modes of thought. The *genius loci* could make neither head

nor tail of them. Debarred thus from entering into close relation with the invaders and renewing its life from their life, it suffered. But being beyond the pale of redemption, as all such parasitic earth-engendered spirits of necessity must be, suffering brought no remedial grace. Pining, and hungry for the past, its unrest took the form of freakish malignity, of unseemly whisperings in the ear and pluckings at the sleeve.

Yet, in truth, had it but known, the spirit of the Sultan-i-bagh might have fared much worse and encountered a far less sympathetic human medium. As the English go, it had come in contact with persons of an unusual amount of imagination. Little Damaris Verity's mind offered a sensitive plate to outside influences. Wholly innocent as yet, pure in baby mind and body, such influences, though they might excite and disturb, were powerless to do her moral harm. Nevertheless they worked strangely on her, stimulating her apprehension of things unseen, begetting in her precocious perception alike of the glory and alarm of living. They brought her very close to Nature; to the silent life of trees and flowers, the swift glancing life of the innumerable garden birds and grotesque or charming little garden animals. Dim, wistful intuition stirred in her, moreover, of the eternal mysteries of Birth and Death; of the blank night from out which all visible, sentient beings come and into which again they go; of the inherent instability of all which the eye looks on or the heart desires. She had no word for these things. Her sense of them was inarticulate, an affair not of thought, but of vague and transient emotion. Yet it was there, actual. For in some minds the abstract precedes the concrete, the air breathed is more real than the solid ground trodden underfoot.

Upon Colonel Verity, Damaris' father, the Spirit of the Sultan-i-bagh worked also; but to a very different measure, provoking battle.

By birth and tradition Charles Verity belonged to the pre-democratic era, before the rise of Industrialism had

modified English social life, wherein the County Family was still a power in the land. He was a member of the elder—Hampshire—branch of the Verity family, whose beautiful place, Canton Magna, lies in a fold of the chalk hills looking towards the Sussex border. For the better part of three centuries the Hampshire Veritys, being a cautious and provident race, have laid up considerable treasure on earth; serving their own interests and, in a wisely minor degree, those of King and Country, as land-owners, lawyers, Members of Parliament professing High Tory principles, and Anglican clergy equally sound in their condemnation of Popery and of Dissent. Impreguably entrenched in prejudice, in self-complacent mediocrity, they have lived and died impressively ignorant of every point of view except their own.

The great majority were—and are—true to type as some carefully specialized breed of sheep or poultry. But from manifestations of the Eternal Humour not even English county families are wholly exempt. Sometimes they are troubled by production of a child deformed or degenerate. Sometimes—but this misfortune is rarer—are put to the blush by advent of one, as in the case of Percy Bysshe Shelley, of transcendent talent.

To this last and extreme trial the Verity family has not, as far as records serve me, ever been subjected. Still it has had its annoying surprises, vexations, and embarrassments.

As a promoter of such, Thomas Clarkson Verity offers a notorious example. A soft, round, busy, short-legged, mercurial-minded little man, pleasingly confidential in manner and optimistic in sentiment—possessed, moreover, by a curiosity at once unsatiable and admirably polite. Accomplished linguist, student of natural science and of philosophy, member of the Linnean and other learned societies, friend of the poet Southey, of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, correspondent of Baron von Humboldt and of Madame de Staël—he barely escaped the guillotine in Paris, whither his hopeful and inquiring spirit had led him

during the Terror. But, in fact escaping, he cheerfully continued his investigation of things in general ; and died, a contented bachelor, in 1852, just seven months short of the completion of his hundredth year.

Charles Verity, his great-nephew, though very different in person and in temperament, departed hardly less widely from the received family type.

At the tender age of eleven—his mother being dead and his elder half-sister, Harriet Verity, reigning at Canton Magna in her place—he was sent to Harchester. There he received the emotionally brutalizing and intellectually stultifying education common to the English public school of the period. During the first three years of his sojourn at that famous and aristocratic seat of learning, Charles was more unhappy than it is at all advisable for any small boy to be. He suffered wounds, both to flesh and spirit, the scars of which he carried to the grave. Spartan methods arbitrarily applied, unredeemed by either the restraints or inspiration of Spartan ideals, are ugly, blighting things for little boys to run their little heads against. Unluckily for himself, Charles was capable of observation and of thought. He recognized that the barbarities practised upon him, the hardships he endured in respect of poor food, cold, and dirt, served no purpose. They meant nothing, they led nowhere. Against this his reason rebelled.

After those black years, from eleven to fourteen, things mended somewhat. The boy grew tall and strong, his muscles and temper alike formidable. From the first his personal courage had been above reproach. Now, as a young savage among other insolent, well-bred and unscrupulous young savages, he held his own. It was at this time that his great-uncle, Thomas Clarkson Verity, scenting a certain originality in the boy, began to cultivate his acquaintance. The black sheep of a self-righteously white flock are bound sooner or later to forgather. Henceforward Charles' holidays were spent mainly at Deadham

Hard—the rambling patchwork of a house overlooking the narrow channel by which the rivers, Arne and Wilner, make their united exit from the land-locked mud-flats and salt marshes of Marychurch Haven to the open sea. Here, supported by a venerable French manservant, an equally venerable English housekeeper, Jasper Faircloth, boatman and fisherman, three gardeners and very many tabby cats, the said great-uncle, Thomas Clarkson Verity, dwelt.

After the bleak ferocities of Harchester, after the heavy conventionalities of his own home, Canton Magna—as governed by his half-sister Harriet—Deadham Hard appeared to Charles an earthly paradise. The social and domestic atmosphere was one of at once singular freedom and singular amenity; eminently serene, though, as the boy soon discovered, in many respects eminently ripe. His host treated him with unfailing courtesy and affection, fussing over his comforts and pleasures as a woman might. The household adopted him at sight. After some preliminary reconnoitring and skirmishing—boys like dogs, being the secular tormentors of their incomparable race—the tabby cats followed suit.

Charles was happy to the point of mistrust. For holidays, as understood at Deadham Hard, seemed almost too good to be true. To find his tastes and feelings thus considered disconcerted him. Could so delightful a state of things last?

It did last, with the consequence that Charles laid aside his savagery as an outworn garment for which he no longer had use. Only a certain gravity of speech and demeanour stayed by him, wholly engaging as taking its rise in gratitude and diffidence. A new world opened out around him; a far larger, more reasonable, beautiful, and amazingly cleverer world than he heretofore had knowledge of. He perceived what an immense amount there was to learn and know outside the school curriculum; outside, indeed, England, the English language, English fashions and habits

of thought. He felt an eager reaching forth towards all this, while listening to his great-uncle's talk. For there seemed positively no limit to the old gentleman's information and acquirements, as his conversation moved lightly from subject to subject, illuminated by ideas, pointed by anecdote, and, while devoid of grossness, seasoned by a keen-edged and very pretty wit.

The house was full of books, and Charles gave himself to much desultory reading, his mind being in the receptive, constructive stage to which no sort of material comes amiss. He also—less immediately profitable occupation—indulged in much day-dreaming when lying out on the warm yellow shingle of the Bar, the eager swirl and chuckle of the rivers making music on one hand, the steady lap and plunge of the sea on the other; or when navigating the shifting, treacherous water-ways of Marychurch Haven after wild fowl, which there abound.

At times the primitive male instinct of killing for killing's sake arose in him, and he handled his gun with effect. But more often the long remote hours, solitary save for the company of Jasper Faircloth, the boatman, were unstained by shedding of innocent blood. The wonder and poetry of the great land-locked estuary under the enormous arch of sky, the wonder and poetry of his own youth, of his own lithe, indolently vigorous body, along with the nameless unrest and delicious sadness which haunt the dawns of manhood, held him captive to the exclusion of any murderous desires. For now, growing older, in his day-dreaming the question of love and of woman began, stealthily at first and shyly, to make itself felt. On most subjects he sought information from that walking encyclopædia, his great-uncle, with security of prompt and skilful enlightenment. But this particular question he knew by instinct he must just worry out for and by himself. To lay it before the polite, erudite, scholarly little old gentleman would somehow—though he could not say exactly why—be quite furiously indiscreet.

Thereupon the delight of Deadham Hard began to wear a trifle thin. This, not because the boy was fickle, faithless in affection or impatient of the obligations which affection creates ; but simply because action claimed him. He had been storing energy during those recurrent holidays at Deadham Hard. Now the energy thus stored demanded an outlet. Throughout life imperative need to learn and to reflect played see-saw, in Charles Verity, with equally imperative need to create and to administer. Such duality does not make for happiness. It is more convenient, both for oneself and for others, to be built all of a piece.

Considerably against his great-uncle's will—the latter being ardently pacifist and anti-militarist—Charles chose soldiering as his profession. And here the duality aforesaid long stood in the way of advancement. When he received his commission brains were at a discount in the British Army. To possess them was disadvantageous since to employ them was reckoned bad form. It followed that Charles Verity's first years as a soldier bore a certain resemblance to his first years at a public school. The discarded garment of self-protective savagery had to be donned afresh in the face of his equals ; while, in face of his superiors, he found it best to disguise superfluous intelligence under a cloak of silence and coldness of manner. Brains, however, refuse to be denied. He continued to reflect, to wonder, and, when books were obtainable, to read.

In 1843—Charles was then four and twenty—driven by a craving for travel he took service in the Indian Army. The East confronted him with new and amazing impressions, with a spectacle as gorgeous as it was invulnerable and complex. Rightly or wrongly he failed to regard the Indian Peninsula as created solely in the interests of British commerce, or in that of needy British younger sons. He strove to keep such heretical opinions to himself ; but almost daily occasions arose when they

neavitably coloured his attitude and speech. The result was a certain social loneliness. Men, even if grudgingly, admitted and admired his courage and all-round sportsmanship. Women ran after him on account of his name and singular good looks. A few persons held him in close and romantic friendship. But, in the main, Charles Verity was not popular; nor was he content, that essential duality still impeding his progress.

Then in the fullness of time the long-gathering storm of the Mutiny broke, bringing with it a call to action inexorable and immediate, to deeds at once remorseless and heroic. Charles Verity heard, understood, responded, his whole nature welded to clearness and singleness of purpose in the flame.

His name figured conspicuously in more than one terrible and extravagantly gallant episode. Promotion was rapid. He emerged from those two hideous and magnificent years not only a famous, but a married man.

In the year 1860, he was appointed to a Chief Commissionership of which Bhutpur was head-quarters.

And to him, now—more particularly in connection with the coming of Henrietta Pereira—the hungry, discomfited and consequently malicious Spirit of the Sultan-i-bagh had its private word to say.

II

TO Damaris the day, so far, had not appeared auspicious. The temperature ruled unusually high for the month of March, making her languid and fretty. Her neat routine of play, rest, and lessons had been interfered with. For, instead of bestowing undivided attention upon her, Sarah Watson, her nurse, committed her to the care of Tulsi, the white and amber-robed, velvet-eyed little ayah. This, in Damaris' opinion, constituted an insult to her small high mightiness. Slave-driving instincts are strong in infancy, hence she proceeded—in nursery parlance—"to lead Tulsi a life." But the exercise of tyranny brought the tyrant scant satisfaction. Tulsi was too obedient, too docile. The martyrdom of so mild a victim lacked point. It followed that the little girl felt cross and unhappy, quite unpardonably injured, indeed, and put about.

From early morning much sweeping, dusting, and rubbing up of furniture went forward in the handsome corner room adjoining the day nursery. This, in itself, was disturbing. For, far as Damaris' memory carried clearly, the said room had remained untenanted and shut up. In the India of the early sixties hotels were practically non-existent. At the Sultan-i-bagh, as in all official residences, hospitality obtained on a lavish scale. Yet, however numerous the guests, to none was this corner room ever allotted. Hence Damaris entertained a peculiar feeling towards it, as a place apart, at once creepy and

sacred—in primitive minds the two words are often synonymous. If a window on to the gallery, or the door on to the corridor, chanced to be ajar, she would haunt the threshold, peering in, awed, fascinated, intensely curious.

Right in the centre of the room stood a great black-wood bedstead, its four tall, slender pillars, head and foot-board, intricately carved with foliage and intertwining branches, amid which lurked half-discovered shapes human and animal. Seen thus through the shuttered dimness, stripped of bedding and hangings, it showed oddly forbidding, a mere lifeless skeleton of that most friendly article of domestic furniture. Its aspect affected the Damaris' imagination profoundly. She was afraid, yet compelled, to look at it; and, flitting away, to return again and again so long as opportunity offered for yet another look. So doing an odour invariably met her at once fragrant and stale, very troubling to the senses and liable to cling to her nostrils for hours afterwards. Room which she never actually entered, close, rather sickening sweetness inhabiting it and starkly naked bed, were to Damaris things intimately personal, too personal indeed to admit of inquiry. She might want, did want, dreadfully to know just why and how they came about, what they were there for; but she could ask no questions. She kept silence, meditating upon, fearing, loving them, with furtive secrecy.

Yet, to-day, although only his secretaries, Maurice Lugard and Jimmy Hockless, young civilians of two and one year's service respectively, were staying at the Sultan-i-bagh—they fixtures moreover downstairs in the bachelors' quarters—Colonel Verity ordered this particular room to be prepared for immediate occupation. Damaris was shocked by such departure from tradition, such rude invasion of mysterious sanctities. Her whole small world shook to its foundations. The habits of all her little lifetime appeared threatened, becoming unstable and unsafe.

It is conceivable her feelings were shared, in some measure, by her nurse, Sarah Watson—a woman of about eight and thirty, tall and spare, worn-looking, reticent in manner and in speech. For, undoubtedly, while superintending the preparations aforesaid, Mrs. Watson's directions to sleek, brown men-housemaids were peremptory; and her voice, with its slightly grating Lancashire accent, harsh to the verge of menace.

That afternoon, while the sun still blazed some two hours high above the blood-red, purple and grey of the Native City, a breeze arose. It stirred the sandy dust of the Maidan, and made a thin, dry singing, as of phantom violins, in cracks of woodwork and hinges of casements and doors. Hearing it, Damaris forgot her injuries; or, to be accurate, her moral and mental disturbance took another turn. For that fine-drawn wind-music solicited and pursued her until her poor little heart ached with longing for she knew not what, save that what she longed for was beautiful beyond comprehension, alluring as it was out of reach, plaintive yet masterful, and very strange.

At five years old such emotional growing pains usually end in the impotence of tears.

"'Tend to me, Nannie," she lamented. "'Tend to me d'reckly minute. I feel all hurt inside in my thinkings, and Tulsi isn't no use to me. She doesn't understand nothing about thinkings—not white Europe thinkings like mine, I didn't never believe you was so unkind and selfin' as to 'tend to anything else, Nannie, when you know I want all your 'tention myself."

Thus admonished—preparation of the corner room being now completed even to the setting of bowls of jasmine and roses on the dressing-table and escritoire—Sarah Watson, with an almost bitter alacrity, took the child on her knee, wiped the wet eyes, and kissed the soft, drooping mouth. Further she dressed Damaris, most consolingly, in her best tambour muslin frock—

faintly blue, pink, and lilac flowers embroidered on a white ground—her open-work silk socks and bronze sandal shoes. And, such glories of apparel proving an excellent restorative, led her downstairs into the great circular central hall, and through the state drawing-room into the front verandah, preceded by Jessie, Colonel Verity's fat old fox terrier, and followed by Tulsi, the ayah, bearing Mildred Felicia, reigning favourite of Damaris' extensive family of dolls.

Here, on the ground floor, doors and French windows stood wide open. A warm, heavy quiet held the place. Upon the pavement, in the sharp-edged shade of the portico, three white-turbaned, bare-footed, scarlet and gold-coated chuprassies drowsed; their attitudes picturesque, somewhat swaggering as became the servants of so fine a house and great a gentleman, even in their sleep. Inside the massive arches of the verandah, green cane blinds were drawn down to the floor level tempering the tremendous light, so that wicker couches, tables, benches, and long-armed "colonial" chairs ranged away in low-toned perspective of string-colour, mouse-colour and tarnished white.

The prevailing quiet was intensified rather than broken by that delicate wind-singing, as of phantom violins. Intensified, too, by a click of ivory balls and snatches of brief, rather slip-shod talk from the distant biliard-room, where Lugard and Hockless solaced themselves with a desultory game until such time as it was cool enough to stroll over to the Civil Lines and play squash rackets at the Club.

III

TULSI squatted on the drab floor-matting, in her poor but plastic cotton draperies. The muscles of her slender brown arms were taut, and the green glass bangles on her wrists clinked and jingled as she held the fox terrier by the collar, while Damaris essayed to balance Mildred Felicia, side-saddle fashion, on the dog's smooth back. Jessie jibbed and wriggled. Mildred Felicia limply swayed and slipped. Damaris' voice rose to shrillness as she scolded the maid, appealed to the terrier's better feelings, and encouraged the doll to keep her seat.

Hearing the scuffle, Mrs. Watson looked up from her needlework. She could boast but slight physical attraction. Her features were insignificant, her face inexpressive; yet she presented a certain definiteness of personality, unsmiling and, in a sense, obdurate. Her eyes were very steady, those of a person of courageous spirit; but of one who, having beheld terrible sights, refuses to forget.

She had watched her husband—quarter-master of an English regiment—and her two children die, he of wounds, they of fever and dysentery, during the siege of Lucknow whereby the iron very effectually entered into her soul. Shorn of all which made life sweet, far from friends and country, she found herself adrift amid the pitiful mass of human wreckage which, from all time, has marked the red tide-lines of war. Chance brought her case to Colonel Verity's notice. He engaged her as maid to his young wife a few months before Damaris' birth.

The mid-nineteenth century stands pre-eminent as an era of sentiment, of extravagant partisanship—miscalled hero-worship—of condemnations and canonizations in which reason and judgment had remarkably little part. Extenuating circumstances dared not raise a qualifying voice. This was true of all classes. Hence, probably it came about that Sarah Watson, widowed and childless, found fiercely jealous comfort in baby Damaris; while, for Damaris' father she conceived an almost fanatical veneration, not only as saviour in the hour of her extreme need, but, in some sort, as avenger of her sorrows and her dead. The native population, meanwhile—Hindu and Moslem alike—she hated with silent, deep-seated, unremitting hatred; which same hatred, such is the inherent irony of things, undoubtedly lent dignity to her character and interest to her life. She had her idea, in short.

Her religious sense was strong. Faithfully, reverently, she read her Bible morning and night. The Old Testament for choice; since in common with all Puritans she actually, if unconsciously, very much preferred Sinai to Calvary, Jehovah to Christ. These readings, as she understood them, confirmed and justified her hatred. Clearly the Almighty shared her views! Let these heathen and unbelievers, therefore, become hewers of wood and drawers of water till such time as they perished from off the face of modern India, even as their prototypes, Hivites, Hittites, Jebusites, worshippers of Baal and of Ashtoreth perished from off the face of the ancient Canaan.

Sarah Watson's sense of humour being as defective as her religious sense was vigorous, she carried analogy a step further. In Colonel Verity she recognized a heaven-sent smiter of Philistines hip and thigh—a Joshua, a Gideon, a David—with, of course, in the latter case, certain regrettably over-gay episodes very much left out. He could do no wrong. He was a man after God's own heart.

And precisely on this account, as she now sat working in the spacious afternoon quiet of the princely oriental

house, thoughts of the long-disused corner room upstairs troubled her. She disapproved the ceremonial sweepings, dustings, beautifyings, which she had this morning superintended there. Yet they were ordered by the infallible one. Her conscience smote her. He could not be in error. Was she in error herself? And, if not, who was?

The scuffle, meanwhile, upon the drab floor-matting became more pronounced.

"I'd give over that rough game with the dog, if I were you, Damaris," she said. "You're only over-heating yourself and rumpling your frock. Better leave Jessie alone. If you cease her much more she'll turn spiteful and snap."

But advice passed unheeded. A combative strain in the child's nature was in the ascendant, making her obstinate to have her way with subject human being, animal, and toy alike. Though the stars fell from heaven, Mildred Felicia must take her evening ride!

Then certain stars did fall—in a sense. And that with altogether surprising and even fateful results.

For sudden commotion arose in the glaring drive without—headlong gallop of road-weary horses lashed to a showy finish, grind of wheels, lumbering rattle and creak, as a heavy carriage, escorted by a trio of native horsemen, turned out of the avenue and drew up before the portico in a whirl of sun-gilded dust. The scarlet and gold-coated chuprassies, drowsing in the shadow, swung on to their feet; while answering commotion arose within the great house, the whole place seeming to come alive like a stirred-up ant-heap—orders loudly given, hurried runnings to and fro. A door banged, the sound of it reverberating through lofty vaulted spaces. The idle click of the billiard balls ceased.

Letting her needlework drop, Sarah Watson started, and stood, her neck stretched, listening. A dull flush stained her sallow skin and, fading, left a bluish pallor on her face.

Be they never so brave of spirit, those who have once met Fear, in visible bodily form, are liable to such nervous upsets. Whether, in the present case, that sudden commotion without and answering commotion within, swung her back into the horror of the Mutiny years—horror of swift surprise and equally swift slaughter, domestic amenities and dignities, such as now surrounded her, wiped out in lick of flame and spatter of blood—or whether it forecasted more civilized and private tribulations, connected with her beautifyings of the corner room upstairs, the poor woman could not say. Either way her instinct was of danger threatening, not so much herself—about that she did not greatly care—as the two human beings, father and child, master and nursling on whom her heart was set. Her soul cried out to save them from some impending “wrath to come.” Then long habit of self-control reasserted itself. Panic passed. It is foolish to beat the air. Tremulous yet stern, she sat down again, and, stooping, stiffly picked up and went on with her needlework.

But her agitation, though thus brief and wordless, communicated itself to Damaris. The little vexations of the day, the wind music—as of phantom violins—so charged with expectation and enticement, finally her struggle with maid, doll and dog, combined to excite the child and produce in her a super-sensitive condition. Apprehension of the instability of things pierced her. She, too, took fright—angry, resentful fright. Still clasping Mildred Felicia by one stubby waxen hand, while the rest of that unfortunate equestrienne’s person trailed limply, face downwards, upon the floor, Damaris turned, ran, and flung herself against her nurse. The fox terrier, meanwhile, relieved of its burden, with a sturdy wrench and wriggle broke away from the ayah; and added to the general confusion by dashing along the verandah, to the portico, barking explosively, where, still barking, it took its stand among the crowd of servants and retainers gathered upon the steps.

"What is it? What is it?" Damaris cried. "Why's everybody rushing about in such a fuss? They didn't ought to behave like that and spoil my nice play about Mildred Felicia going out riding. It's very unkind. I don't like being 'sturved when I'm busy with my playings, and I don't like what I haven't be told about to happen. You ought to have told me, Nannie, when you was dressing me before we comed downstairs."

Hearing which petulant outbursts, feeling the soft, warm little body pushing angrily against her, Watson became a prey to self-reproach. Her own nervous lapse was not fair upon the child. She blamed herself; but, even in so doing, thoughts of the corner room upstairs worked in her. Only in the second degree, as she told herself, could she be held blameworthy. Blame in the first degree localized itself—somehow—there.

"What it it?" Damaris importuned her. "Nannie, Nannie, 'tend to me. Don't you hear? What is it?"

"Hush, darling—have a little patience. Nannie always tells you what you ought to know when she can. But——"

She stop'd, her own and the child's attention diverted, silence, too, falling on the chattering crowd gathered upon the steps, even Jessie ceasing her barking, beginning to whine ingratiatingly, wag her docked tail, and fawn.

For Colonel Verity, notably tall and fine-drawn in his white linen, hot-weather clothes came out from the house. His head thrown back, looking neither to left nor right, taking long, eager steps, he passed, bare-headed, from the shadow of the portico into the fierce sunshine. The servants, falling away on either hand, ranged themselves in two lines of dusky, motley, saluting figures between which he moved, arrogantly careless of observation, down the wide marble steps to the waiting carriage.

To Damaris the sight of him proved splendidly reassuring, restoring her confidence in the essential stability of things. She drew herself up, ruffling a little, shaking

out her muslin skirts and planting her bronze-slipped feet proudly.

"Who's the Commissioner Sahib going to meet, Nannie?" she demanded. "And why don't they come to him, instead of 'bliging him to fetch them? I think it's very rude to make him go out in the sun like that. They didn't ought to. Who is they, Nannie?"

"A lady who you and I don't know, Miss Damaris."

"Don't you like the lady to come?" the child asked.

"It is not my place to like or dislike anyone whom the Commissioner chooses to ask here."

Damaris looked at her observantly. Her little back stiffened, and, her baby face resolute, her dark arched eyebrows meeting in a frown above the small, slightly aquiline nose:—"Never mind, Nannie," she said, with an air of innocent patronage vastly engaging. "If she's not a nice lady we'll have her sent away d'reckly. I'll speak to the Commissioner Sahib. I won't let her 'sturb you at all."

Then she promptly forgot all about Sarah Watson, all about herself, all about everything save the surprising scene taking place there right before her eyes.

IV

CHARLES VERITY came back slowly up the lane of saluting figures to the head of the steps, Mrs. Pereira upon his arm. There he paused, and, instead of going straight into the house, turned aside into the verandah.

Neither spoke. But to Damaris—watching wide-eyed down the long perspective of cloistered space, while the wind made music in the cane blinds and swaying tufted branches of the casuarina trees immediately without—her father's face appeared bright and strange as if a light played over it, though he and his companion stood in the clear shadow effectually screened from the flaming of the western sun. The little girl had never seen him look thus before. It affected her intimately, even physically, so that she went hot all over, feeling abashed, very small and shy. Had she not, indeed, been too acutely busy watching, she must have run away or wept.

In the early sixties crinoline still obtained. A ridiculously inconvenient fashion, yet one delightfully feminine in effect, giving peculiar value and charm to a well-poised head, neat waist, pretty foot and ankle when by rare chance these latter broke covert. The sexes stood far apart in those days. Neither in costume nor mental and moral equipment, could there be risk of mistaking man for woman or woman for man. In how far this contributed to a higher marriage and birth rate than the existing one, it might be invidious to inquire.

Mrs. Pereira, as she stood now beside Colonel Verity,

presented an appearance almost extravagantly feminine. She wore a round cloak of light, self-coloured silky material, which covered her, extinguisher-wise, to the hem of her widely-distended petticoats. Her narrow-brimmed white hat had a trimming of pale blue feathers and black ribbon velvet. Over the low crown of it a blue gauze veil floated. Her mouse-brown hair was arranged in a large bun-like chignon. From behind her left ear one long smooth curl depended, till the end of it rested on the swell of her bosom.

Not only crinolines but profiles were then in fashion; the squashy, loose-lipped, boneless democratic style of beauty now prevalent not having yet reached us from across the Atlantic. Mrs. Pereira possessed a profile. Her whole mask, indeed, was chiselled and finished as a cameo. Modern taste would probably condemn it as being at once too defined and too finical, lacking in mobility and in amount of actual flesh. It is undeniable that her lips were thin, although when she smiled the corners of her mouth tipped upwards with almost disconcerting merriment. Her eyes did more than smile. They laughed and that not unfrequently, thanks to the entertainment afforded her by the vagaries, vanities, weaknesses of her acquaintance, friends, and other than friends, alike. Towards all these her attitude, though not actively benevolent, was at least admirably tolerant. For, if the passion of pity was somewhat wanting in her, the passion of persecution was wholly so. At three and thirty her complexion still successfully withstood the acerbities of the Indian climate, her skin being remarkably fine in texture and of an almost silvery whiteness. On the round of either cheek a charming blush-rose blossomed, which owed its presence to the natural excellence of her circulation rather than to art.

Such, when Damaris first beheld her, was Mrs. John Knatchbull Pereira. A woman of exquisite surfaces, both mental and physical, polished, iridescent, sub-

stantially the same yet superficially changeful as mother of-pearl; having, not impossibly, as basis of nature and character, traces of the gritty, harshly resistant "shell" which backs that extremely lovely substance.

The railroad system of North-West India was still in its infancy, modes of locomotion differing little from those obtaining in the age of Akbar or of Shah Jehan. Mrs. Pereira had just alighted from a broiling, dust-smothered, two days' journey by road. Yet she presented an appearance refreshingly uncrumpled and intact. It was among the privileges of the pre-democratic, cameo-like woman to grow neither discoloured or blousy under such stress of circumstance.

Nor was this uncrumpledness a matter of outward seeming only. For though, just now, more deeply moved than was at all her wont, she remained mistress of herself, her intelligence disengaged, her will in active command of her somewhat fluttered senses. It followed that, while finding in silent communion with her host a flattering tribute to her own charms, she recognized prolonged indulgence in it might lead to embarrassment both on his part and her own. She began, therefore, to speak, rallying him gracefully, a note of pretty triumph in her tone.

"I told you I should come some fine day. I am sure you did not believe me, being wise in your own conceit, after the manner of great men. Aren't you a little ashamed of your own want of faith, seeing that I very actually and positively have come?"

Colonel Verity made no immediate reply. He was a head and shoulders taller than Mrs. Pereira. He stood looking down at her intently, possessively, that strange light still playing over his face.

"Yes, you have come—you have come," he repeated, his voice deep, slow, reflective. "You are perfectly right. I did not believe you would ever compass it—even if you remembered. I was wrong. I did you an injustice."

He paused, still surveying her with an intent, possessive gaze.

"You are a wonderful creature," he said; "a woman who never disappoints one, who is always as good as her word."

Speech conveyed even more flattering tribute than silent communion. Mrs. Pereira was by no means insensible to the charm of it. But it suggested a degree of ardour foreign in her programme, and therefore again calculated to lead to embarrassment. She took him up with sparkling quickness.

"I hope so. But that applies equally all round—I mean, wherever I give my word there I keep it."

"I know. I understand. I am under no misapprehension whatever."

The light ceased to play over Charles Verity's features. For an instant he laid his right hand on her right hand as it rested upon his arm. This not in any wise as offering a caress, but gravely as ratifying a treaty.

"We needn't labour the point," he went on. "All the same I doubt if I have not been guilty of a huge mistake in allowing you to come."

Henrietta had sufficient presence of mind to shake her head smiling.

"Indeed, you are guilty of no mistake whatever," she declared.

Still she felt somewhat nonplussed. She accused him of want of tact, of unexpected clumsiness. A hint should be accepted without comment; else all one's ingenuity, one's delicacy, in hinting is wasted. One might as well have declined upon the vulgar bludgeon of plain speaking! Open refusal to labour the point amounts, in fact, to labouring it profusely. Colonel Verity might not be disappointed in her; but she had a nasty little spasm of alarm lest she might be disappointed in Colonel Verity.

"Dismiss the idea once and for all, or I shall be obliged to feel apologetic and uncomfortable," she said. "For

to be practical, my dear friend, how could you prevent my coming? As I wrote you word, I have not been at my best lately. Oh! nothing definite; but I longed for a little change of air, of scene, of—perhaps—company. Entertaining has been incessant all the winter—always the same people too, till I felt like a squirrel in a wheel. The Delhi climate does not altogether suit me. My doctor, a nice biddable little man, urged a rest, a holiday. Others submitted—isn't Bhutpur renowned for its bracing air? So everything fell into line, you see, quite naturally—and then——"

Thus far Mrs. Pereira had spoken in tones of pretty reproach and protest, punctuating her address with gay sideways, upward glances. Now she took her hand from Colonel Verity's arm and moved a step further from him.

"And then," she repeated, a touch of reserve and seriousness in her manner, "—since it appears I have to defend my coming—I had heard certain things I didn't like."

"Indeed?"

"Rumours of official intrigue and bothers reached me."

"How?"

"Through the ever-faithful Carteret."

"Carteret ought to have held his tongue," Colonel Verity said curtly.

"Oh! you mustn't blame him. I asked questions A good many. He answered them, like the loyal fellow he is. You see"—Mrs. Pereira fixed her eyes on the drab floor-matting—"I have never forgotten the outcry raised in some quarters by your appointment to the Commissionership. Spite dies hard, specially in a restricted society and hot climate. What Carteret told me merely confirmed the impression I had received from your last letters. I gathered that you were harassed, and—may I say it, mighty potentate though you are?—depressed and unhappy. I feared you had fallen into

your old bad habit of brooding, of tormenting your over-scrupulous conscience."

"My over-scrupulous conscience!" Colonel Verity exclaimed.

"Yes—don't mock. I mean it. Tormenting your over-scrupulous conscience with unfounded regrets; and your over-active mind with insoluble problems concerning the ways of God with man."

Henrietta put up one hand, and pushed back the blue gauze veil floating from the brim of her hat.

"I know it's the fable of the mouse starting off to rescue the lion," she said, glancing up again smiling. "But I was presumptuous enough to think the mouse might do some useful nibbling of ropes, and—well—some exorcising of demons generally. So, with the beneficent climate of Bhutpur as my excuse, I packed, took the road and came."

"I'm not worth it, my dear," Colonel Verity said. But again the strange light played over his face.

"It is for me to judge of that, I think," Henrietta remarked quietly.

"No, it isn't. It's never for the woman to judge where her own well-being is in question. Get out, dog."

This to the fox terrier which, jealous of attention, walked slowly round him, all four legs stiff and tall, bristling along the spine, sniffing a little and whining.

"I ought to have hardened myself," he went on. "Advanced reasons. Lied, other means of making myself offensive and your visit impracticable failing.—Get out, Jessie, I tell you. Lie down.—I ought to have seen it all round and faced the possible consequences. But I let natural selfishness get the upper hand. I thought only of my own gain; and so like a fool and hypocrite—mostly the latter—temporized, refusing to reckon with the consequences till it was too late."

"So much the better. I am glad," Henrietta said, almost involuntarily, some quality in the man drawing,

driving, her against her will and sense of social expediency.

Then they both stood looking one another in the eyes again, holding silent communion—her intelligence on the stretch all the while, trying to read his exact thought and unveil the depth of his meaning.

This time Colonel Verity was the first to speak. The words broke out suddenly, as a command rather than a request.

"Take off your hat and things. They're in the way. I can't see you properly."

Mrs. Pereira obeyed without protest. It did not occur to her either to resent or be amused at his roughness.

As she undid the buttons of her cloak, he lifted it from her shoulders and threw it across his arm. Took her hat, as she slipped the elastic of it from under her chignon.

"That's better," he said.

Then with an unscrupulous and daring directness, his eyes travelled over her person; noting, as she was sensible—every detail of her appearance and clothing. The embroidered muslin collar, cut low, exposing all the fragile column of her throat; the bodice of her blue and white striped dress, moulding the roundness of her bosom, nipped at the waist by a blue silk band and gold buckle; the three tiers of gathered flounces encircling her distended skirt; the jewellery she wore, ruby and pearl drop earrings, ruby-headed gold snake brooch, long gold watch chain from the loop of which a cluster of charms and trinkets dangled; the rings upon her pointed fingers, the bracelets upon her left wrist. These first. Lastly his eyes—deep-set, swift, unsparing—steadied on to her chiselled face and its delicate rigidity of outline; the softly curling fringe of hair upon her forehead; the little pink-tinted ears close set against her head.

"The years have not touched you," he said at length. "Truly you are a wonderful, an invulnerable creature! You're not changed—thank God—not changed by so much as the shadow of a shade."

"So are not you, Charles Verity," she asserted. And turning away she stared the length of the cool, low-toned verandah to where, framed by the terminal archway, the flowers and foliage of the luxuriant, high-walled garden flamed and glittered in the oblique sunlight. "Perhaps unfortunately," she added under her breath.

For during that prolonged and searching scrutiny her humour altered. The said scrutiny had gone forward without hint of apology or self-consciousness on her host's part. To Henrietta it had, indeed, appeared disconcertingly impersonal as that of some expert critically examining a work of art. This made her uncomfortable. But the spoken verdict, once that examination concluded, made her more uncomfortable still. For if the first erred by being too impersonal, the second erred by being not nearly impersonal enough.

Henrietta was nothing if not popular with mankind. Young men languished for and older men confided in her. Let it be added that, throughout her many friendships, she displayed remarkable talent in maintaining an equable temperature. Boiling and freezing point were alike distasteful to her. She plumed herself, and not without reason, on her ability to manage members of the grosser sex with a maximum of benefit to them, of entertainment to herself, and a minimum of social and emotional danger to either. But just now this confidence in her own ability grew slack and sagged a little. Possibly she was over-tired by her journey, less skilfully on the spot than usual. She hoped it amounted to no more than that. Still uneasy suspicion took her she was up against something, in masculine shape, altogether bigger, more complex and consequently more difficult, than she had bargained for; followed by further uneasy suspicion that it would have been safer to seek change of air and scene elsewhere than at the Bhutpur Sultan-i-bagh, and select some more ordinary masculine being than Colonel Verity to whom to play the part of Egeria.

Whilst she thus debated, a movement in the verandah midway between where she stood and that splendour of outdoor light and colour, attracted her attention. With quick, self-protective instinct, Henrietta focussed her eyes upon the moving object.

Near one of the tall French windows, opening from the great, dimly-seen drawing-room on the left, an angular European woman sat, clothed in extreme severity and plainness of grey linen gown and black silk apron. A slender little girl, wearing a soft embroidered muslin frock and pink sash, leaned against her elbow. The child's hair, warm brown in colour, hung as a thick cloak to below her waist. Her eyes were large and luminous, the darkness of eyelash and eyebrow very marked. She observed Henrietta with an absorbed unblinking seriousness hardly less impersonal and inquisitorial than that to which Charles Verity lately subjected her. With one small square hand the little girl held her chin. This added quaintly to her air of concentrated observation. Her other hand clasped that of a large wax doll which trailed, face downwards, upon the floor beside her. Both woman and child were now excessively, unnaturally, still—so it seemed to Henrietta—as though waiting until their inspection being complete, they proceeded to judgment.

By this unexpected revelation of the existence of spectators and the supposed attitude of the said spectators towards herself, Mrs. Pereira was far from pleased. That she, usually so alertly conscious of her surroundings, should have remained ignorant of their presence argued a most disquieting inaptitude. She beat up her common-sense, her *savoir faire*, her social acumen. But these hummed and havered, responding but limply to the summons of that little drum. Surprise, perplexing surprise, continued to pervade her. She was aware of sensations not only of annoyance but of dislike.

"What a wonderfully wise-looking little child," she exclaimed.

Mislaying her good manners for the moment, she stared the nurse's meagre grey-clad figure up and down, blush roses meanwhile blooming to a hotter colour on her cheeks. Then turning to her host :

" Ah ! that is Damaris. I had almost forgotten."

Charles Verity had moved away, laid down her hat and cloak. Coming back he stood beside Mrs. Pereira, his expression at once derisive and very gentle.

" Yes—that is Damaris—the wise child. And there is where the change you mentioned comes in—in my case—probably," he said.

V

WHEN Colonel Verity and his guest turned into the verandah, Sarah Watson glanced at them, issued whispered but peremptory orders in bastard Hindustani to the little ayah ; and, as the latter vanished noiselessly into the dimness of the great drawing-room, bent her head over her needlework again.

Damaris fidgeted, leaning against her left arm and jogging her elbow. Still she worked on, nicely regulating the gathers of the doll's ball-dress she was fashioning out of a pink muslin silver-powdered sari, bought for that purpose two days previously in the bazaar. To get purchase on the pretty garment during this nice operation, she had pushed aside her black silk apron and pinned the frivolous little skirt to her grey linen knee. Her hands, the knuckles prominent, the branched blue veins upstanding, moved with an irritable dexterity, her needle making vicious scratchings and scrapings as, with the point of it, she stroked the glittering ridge and furrow of the gathers into place.

It passes normal sympathy and understanding to gauge the amount of misery a woman, of intense and narrow nature, can crowd into a few minutes' space. That one brief look had proved all-sufficient to stamp a tormenting picture upon Sarah Watson's retina and set her nerves dancing to a cruel tune. The light playing over Colonel Verity's features by no means escaped her notice, nor did the lady's youth, refinement, air of fashion. She tried

loyally to be deaf and blind to what followed, and succeeded but ill. The temperature of certain words spoken, the intonation and attitude of the speakers, forced itself relentlessly upon her comprehension.

Nor did Damaris' behaviour prove soothing at this juncture. For the child remained lost in contemplation; and, though actually touching her—warm, sweet-breathed, electric with intensity of life—singularly inaccessible. The baby-heart and brain were, as she feared, up and away on some private errand in which she had neither lot nor part. This indifference and independence in one, until now, so exclusively dependent on her reopened the wounds of her mutilated motherhood.

Thus between the man and woman, at whom loyalty and sentiment alike forbade her to look and the child, who ignored her, endurance wore threadbare. Bankrupt in comfort she humbled herself. Leaning sideways she kissed Damaris lightly on the cheek.

"What are you busy about, darling? Tell Nannie why you're so quiet."

The little girl obeyed, hitching up her right shoulder impatiently. Her eyes remained riveted upon her father and Mrs. Pereira.

"You didn't ought to 'sturve me," she said, in accents of reproof. "Can't you see I'm 'bliged to attend to my thinkings."

Her flat little bosom heaved in a long-drawn sigh.

"I'm all aching inside of me with my thinkings, so you mustn't 'spect me to talk to you, Nannie. I can't 'tend to anything else till I've finished."

Thus repulsed, roundly snubbed, Watson was forced back on those neat scratchings and scrapings of the miniature ball-dress.

Her mind was conservative. It had never occurred to her to question the social order; or doubt that distinctions of rank and class were immutable, God-ordained. But now—the situation, pointed moreover by the cold shoulder—

ing administered by her nursling—acceptance and resignation failed. Her mind took a step onward, acquiring a fresh standpoint. She rebelled against the fact that some are born to high station, to luxury, and—if they so choose—to idleness. Others, herself amongst them, to obscurity, dependence, poverty, even to want. With bitterness she resented her position as paid servant in the house of a master. Resented the inequalities of fortune and education which condemned her to passive self-effacement, while the sustained and intimate drama of those two well-bred asking and answering voices went forward close at hand.

As that drama reached its climax in the assertion of changelessness on the one part and change on the other—implying, as that assertion did, a past relation of which she was ignorant—hand and soul alike refused further menial labour. She unpinned the glittering little garment from her knee, and folding it together laid it on the table beside her. The construction of this foolish toy thing was only too fitting a symbol of her own unimportance, and of the trifling consideration in which both father and child held her. That was all she was useful for—the making of doll's frocks! Even while telling herself this, she knew it to be an exaggeration. But in the first flush of rebellion, exaggeration was welcome. She yielded herself to it readily, as a symbol of self-emancipation.

Taking off her thimble, she placed it on the table along with her discarded needlework; and, sitting stiffly upright while her hands met in the hollow of her lap, began slipping her wedding-ring up and down her third finger.

In the fifteen years which had elapsed since her marriage, her hands had coarsened, so that the ring was now too small to pass the middle joint with ease. The rub of it bruised both skin and bone. Therefore she pushed it up and down all the harder, deriving harsh satisfaction from the exercise of force and from self-inflicted pain.

It was this gesture of repudiation and revolt in laying aside her needlework, and the subsequent restless movement of her hands, which arrested Mrs. Pereira's attention, as—a prey to most unaccustomed self-criticism and self-distrust—the latter gazed down the shaded perspective of the verandah to the splendid light and colour of the garden beyond.

Immediately opposite the terminal archway, a group of lofty palms, overtopping the dense growth of trees behind them, raised their plumed crowns against fine gradations of saffron and vermilion staining the languid blue of the upper sky. Their gigantic fronds glinted and rattled as the breeze stirred them. In and out the pale colonnade formed by their smooth annulated stems, a flight of green parrots chased one another screaming. The hot air, indeed, was thick with callings, whistlings, chirrupings, cooings of birds either homing to roost or faring forth in quest of supper. Out near the well orange trees were in blossom; and, at intervals, the scent from them swept through the southern facing archways in gusts of enervating sweetness.

That effect of a noble spaciousness patched with crowded and somewhat incongruous detail, so characteristic of the Indian scene, was just now vividly present as setting to a brief and pitifully ironic human episode.

For a bare minute the eyes of Charles Verity's very attractive English guest met and challenged those of Charles Verity's faithful, devoted English servant. And, during that minute, the opposing wills and interests of the two women met also. Met upon the immemorial battlefield of their sex—namely, rights of possession—real or imagined—in respect of a man, and of all which had belonged, did now belong, or might hereafter belong to him. Involuntarily, almost unconsciously, yet with the whole push of her nature, each tried to measure the strength of her opponent, discount her claims, and penetrate her purpose.

The actual impact was an affair of seconds. Yet upon both it left visible impress; the woman of the world rising to a more studied elegance and composure, the woman of the people declining to a more barren and mortified ineffectiveness. Sarah Watson did not minimize her own discomfiture. She knew herself to be hopelessly outclassed. Denial would be absurd. She did not attempt to deny. And for that very reason her thought softened towards both father and child. Her old loyalty thankfully reaffirmed itself. For they were bewitched. They could not help themselves, and therefore were not to blame after all. The blame lay elsewhere, with one person, the intruder. She began to hate that intruder; and, so doing, her sense of desolation was singularly assuaged. A decent pride revived. Dignity and self-respect returned to her. She told herself she did well to be angry. Told herself God was on her side.

She rose, for now that her presence was at least tacitly acknowledged it became both unnecessary and uncivil to remain seated. Change of attitude, too, was a relief, helping to allay the intensity of mental strain. She smoothed Damaris' brown hair, where it turned back, thick and softly crisp, from the child's low, broad forehead. The movement of her hands was no longer restless or apologetic, protective rather and assertively maternal in touch.

"Oh! don't—don't 'fere with me, Nannie," was all the result she achieved. This breathlessly and plaintively, for, awakened from absorbed contemplation by that touch, Damaris' "thinkings" now found issue in action. The chrysalis was fairly splitting asunder, and the baby-soul in act of emerging, spreading tender, untried wings, about to take tentative, half-fearful flight.

Damaris let go Mildred Felicia's stubby waxen hand. Left the doll sprawling abandoned face downwards upon the floor. Hesitated, poised on the tips of her toes. Then, with arms wide outstretched, running headlong to

Mrs. Pereira, she seized the folds of her flounced blue and white striped dress.

"Oh! take me inside, take me inside, pretty, pretty lady. I want to be noticed so dreadful much. 'Tend to me as well as to the Commissioner Sahib. Please, please love me too," she sobbed.

It was Mrs. Pereira's turn to feel discomfited. The assault was so unexpected, the sincerity of the assailant so manifest! And she objected to impulse, liking to proceed reasonably, deftly and neatly picking her steps, from conclusion to conclusion and from event to event.

During her two days' journey to Bhutpur, Colonel Verity had been the almost exclusive subject of her thoughts. She had rehearsed imaginary conversations, and prepared, as she believed, for all eventualities. But the intercourse of the last half-hour had sent many of her nice previsions to the right-about. The obtrusion of this baby, even as a piece of stage furniture, had caused her a smart little shock. And now the astonishing infant insisted on playing a leading rôle; rushing down to the footlights and falling upon her in violent, quasi-loverlike fashion! Insisted on saying, quite out loud moreover, highly inconvenient things altogether better left unsaid under existing rather parlous circumstances. Really at times the second generation did amount to a very grave error in judgment on the part of its progenitors!

Conscious of lively embarrassment, Mrs. Pereira looked down at the upturned face, the great, pleading, luminous eyes, the quivering mouth, the soft little fingers clutching in such desperate fashion the folds of her dress.

Charles Verity stood close behind her.

"The wise child has spoken. Listen to what the wise child says."

His voice sounded oddly, beguilingly, intimate.

Mrs. Pereira was startled. Things were going too far. She did not half like it. She glanced over her shoulder at the speaker, looked down again at the child clinging

her skirts; and perceived, with a singular alarm, that, allowing for differences of age and sex, of sweetly pathetic ignorance and innocence on the one part and large unsparing experience on the other, that the two faces were identical. If the man was born to effort, ambition, sorrow and conquest—as his past career and present position testified—the child was born to effort, ambition, sorrow and conquest likewise.

Oh! very decidedly she didn't like it. It was so perplexingly off the ordinary lines of social intercourse, the demand altogether too vital, too exceptional. She felt absurdly helpless in face of these two strong, insistent beings, the one standing over her, the other clutching at her petticoats. What did they really want of her! What were they going to do with her now—and in the future? For were they not, in point of fact, setting open a door upon the Unknown, and inviting, even commanding, her to enter? To a tactful, concrete and artificial person, such as Mrs. Pereira, entrance upon the Unknown offers scanty attraction, savours, indeed, of eminently questionable experiment.

She saw it might become necessary to devise expedients of evasion and retreat. Meanwhile she must keep up appearances.

She therefore knelt down with a pretty grace—notwithstanding a slightly absurd encircling rampart of crinoline-supported flounces—and, putting her arms round Damaris, held her against her bosom and kissed her on either cheek.

"Come inside then, dear child," she said, in her gay, clear voice. "It is very sweet of you to welcome me so affectionately. We are going to be great friends, and tell each other lots of secrets, aren't we?"

The little girl's head sank upon Mrs. Pereira's shoulder. Her eyes closed. She gave a long, contented sigh.

"I wanted dreadfully much to get here," she said languidly. "I wasn't sure if I was going to like you or

not, but I kept on thinking. Now I love you. I don't want ever to have you go away—not ever."

"Ah!" Mrs. Pereira laughed, "I'm afraid some other people mightn't quite agree to that."

"Then they'd be very selfin'," Damaris asserted, and, after a pause:

"What are you called please?"

"Henrietta."

Damaris sniffed gently, blissfully.

"Henrietta," she whispered, "what a darling, cosy little smell you have."



BOOK II

SECRET HISTORY



I

THE evening went excellently, affording just such opportunity as showed Mrs. Pereira's social talent at its best. She graded her attentions to a nicety. Her host naturally received the lion's share; yet to his two secretaries, Lugard and Hockless, she dispensed gracious entertainment.

It was late, just upon nine o'clock, when Damaris, holding her nurse's hand, went up to bed. At Mrs. Pereira's request the child had been allowed to stay during dinner, then served at the modest hour of seven. Afterwards, blissfully enthroned upon Henrietta's lap, she remained in the drawing-room while the gentlemen drank their coffee, talked and, by permission, smoked.

To Damaris' eyes the whole room, the whole house in fact, had assumed a new aspect. Everything seemed to smile, to shine with friendly gaiety. The carved black-wood furniture for instance, too often dulled by dust, presented gleaming, satin-like surfaces. In the lamp-light the three great cut-glass chandeliers—relic of former princely occupation—with their scores of pendent pear-shaped lustres, painted the vaulted ceiling in fantastic rainbow patterns. They darted rays of white light too, if, when looking at them, you fluttered your eyelids. This interesting discovery and much besides, Damaris retailed to Sarah Watson; and the fact that the latter proved but an abstracted and silent auditor by no means damped her enthusiasm. She prattled in joyous excitement, her

little voice ringing through the dusky stillness of the great house, as she climbed the winding marble staircase on her way up to bed.

Outside the drawing-room door, a few minutes later, Maurice Lugard—black-haired, blue-eyed, looking boyishly lithe and long of limb in red cummerbund, white duck shell-jacket and trousers—laid hold of Hockless by the shoulders and propelled him, amicably but firmly, across the hall in the direction of the billiard-room and bachelors' quarters.

"Hold on I say, don't ballyrag," the younger man protested. "What are you up to? Don't play the goat. Where's the hurry? You don't really mean to sweat at those beastly old famine statistics again to-night?"

"Never in life." This genially, though still propelling.

"What the dickens, then, made you tell the Chief you did?"

"To get some sort of leverage on to you, my son. Evidently our party was intended to break up as soon as the Watson carried off Damaris, and you showed no signs of moving this side of the Judgment Day."

Hockless dived, doubled, freed himself, very red in the face, irate and perspiring.

"You take liberties sometimes, Lugard, and I don't care about it, I tell you. Why should I move? I was enjoying myself. It's an awful let-up to have a lady to talk to. Why on earth should you come butting in with your beastly famine reports; all the more since you were only hum-bugging? Mrs. Pereira and I were having an awfully interesting talk, getting on like a house on fire."

He straightened the point of his jacket behind and smoothed down his yellow-red hair.

"She met some of my people at Tullingworth last time she was home," he went on, his tone at once aggressive and injured; "and she was just telling me about them. Of course it's all very well for you, Lugard; you've been out long enough to get seasoned to this infernal country. But

I can only inform you I find it a thundering relief to meet anybody who knows who one is—the sort of people one belongs to—where one comes in, don't you know—and who can talk something besides official shop, station gossip, and everlasting worries about filthy niggers. I tell you I get positively sick——”

Lugard patted him on the back kindly.

“No, my dear chap, you needn't tell me. I can see it plain enough for myself. You're green still, and naturally you're sick—homesick, and small shame to you. We all go through that stage when the first glamour of this gorgeous old harridan, the East, wears off a bit.”

His handsome face, as of a cleanly young Roman patrician, softened. He put his hand through Hockless' arm, still gently pushing him in the direction of the billiard room.

“Indeed,” he said, “I'd be the last man breathing to blame you. For wouldn't I give ten years of my life—I, that am by no manner of means out of conceit with living—sometimes on hot weather nights, when there's never a morsel of air to breathe and the bed-sheet scorches like the floor of hell under you, to be riding to hounds once more in sweet old County Wicklow, beneath the roof of grey sky that's barely held up by the tops of the little blue mountains; and see the trout stream dimpling in the glen below, and taste the salt coolth of the wind drawing up from off the sea——”

His brogue became more pronounced, giving tenderness and rhythm to his fluent speech. Tears stood in his eyes. But he smiled them away, laughingly defiant of his own emotion.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “I know jolly well all about it. Nevertheless, homesick or not, Jimmy, it's an error in judgment to behave like a wall-eyed young donkey. Couldn't you perceive we'd outstayed our welcome, and were becoming a nuisance? The better the company so very much the more weren't you and I wanted, my son.”

Hockless drew up short ; opened his mouth, shut it again, rubbed his hair into a wild crest along the top of his not remarkably intellectual head.

" Oh ! " he puffed, " upon my word I'm not sure I quite approve of your saying that, Lugard. I'm not sure it doesn't seem to imply what many people would consider rather offensive."

" Do you know it occurs to me now and then, oh ! priceless James, that you come near being a most confounded blockhead ? " Lugard answered, imperturbably amiable. " What have I said ? Can you tell me ? No, Jimmy. Really I'm half afraid you've an evil mind ; and I'm dead certain you've rather less tact than an average porcupine. Keep your rattling quills to yourself, if you please, my son, and don't try to make holes in me with them. Hands off ! That's the substance of all I've been striving to convey to you. Believe me, you and I will be well-advised to walk circumspectly ; not take too much upon ourselves, or blow our personal twopenny trumpets too loudly. You showed a disposition to give us too much of a solo on your precious little instrument after dinner. Therefore did I apply leverage of untabulated famine statistics. Do you follow ? "

" I call it a beastly——" Hockless blustered.

" No, no. Don't call it anything at all, at all," Lugard interrupted. " Never affirm, Jimmy, never define, unless you're absolutely obliged to. It's pure and unmitigated foolishness, believe me. For your affirmation will beat you with whips and your definition chastise you with scorpions before they've finished with you. Come along and play *écarté* for two-anna points. That'll assist to pacify you."

All of which goes to prove—indirectly—the Spirit of the Sultan-i-bagh was very much awake and abroad that same hot March evening.

II

MRS. PEREIRA felt a glow of refined self-congratulation as she smilingly bade the two young men good-night. The conversation had been light in hand, spontaneous, guiltless of awkward pauses. In the excitement of discoursing about his "people" at home, Hockless made his ingenuous voice heard over-freely. But, just when she meditated measures of repression, Lugard intervened and so all ended on the proper note.

The door once closed behind them, self-congratulation gave place to a less comfortable order of feeling. Englishmen of gentle birth are, in the aggregate, far from ferocious or intractable animals; yet when, as she reflected, it comes to the singular rather than the plural number, and these apparently docile, uninflamable beings are relieved from any fear of critical observation on the part of their fellows, intercourse with them is capable of taking on a less peaceful and innocuous complexion.

Throughout the evening conviction deepened in Mrs. Pereira that her host, whom she had last seen—nearly eight years before—as a man still in the making, was now a man very completely made. He had found himself, had come into his kingdom. Still, as she divined, his present position, notwithstanding the many duties and privileges which it entailed, did not absorb him wholly. He was not unduly puffed up or dazzled by power; but retained his inward freedom, a reserve fund of energy, of sentiment and intellectual acumen. The closely-printed page of his

official life had a goodly margin to it—a blank surrounding space upon which, unless she was much mistaken, words of singular import might even yet be written, words not inconceivably offering a rather startling comment upon the contents of that same closely-printed page.

To this unofficial margin her own relation to him belonged. Hence probably it was that, as the subdued sounds of Lugard and Hockless' scuffle died away in the hall without, her pulse quickened. She even debated the advisability of pleading fatigue and wishing her host good-night; but decided against immediate retreat as undignified. She set herself to talk on lightly—although conscious the talk in question was a mere marking of time—valiantly determined the momentous character of this transition from society to solitude should find no admission in her manner.

Colonel Verity appeared to fall in with her humour readily enough.

"Yes," he said, in reply to some remark of hers, "I am glad they have not bored you. They are a pair of wholesome, clean-run lads, a trifle crude still, but gentleman-like and well-meaning. Lugard is above the average, as young civilians go. He may shape into something superior. He has the qualities of his race and faith."

"Which are?" she inquired.

"Imagination and a sense of worship—a valuable asset in dealing with Orientals. Lugard's common sense is not staggered by the spectacle of prayer, or self-mortification—even of the rather grossly physical sort. Nor does it strike him as improbable that spiritual exercises should produce temporal blessings of an agreeably material and mundane description."

Mrs. Pereira stood in the centre of the room. As she moved slightly, in using her fan, the lamplight caressed her white arms and shoulders; glistened upon the forget-me-not blue silk dress she wore, upon the rows of seed-pearls about her neck and the pearl ornaments decorating the

front of her bodice. From a few steps distant Colonel Verity watched her calmly but intently. She realized that he, too, was merely marking time.

"Lugard's danger is impulsiveness," he went on. "Like every Irishman, his sympathies outrun his judgment. Later that may injure his chances of promotion, British rule being based on justice, dull and stone-cold, rather than poetic. I have no fear of the other boy, Hockless, splitting on that rock. He is a perfect example of the result of our public school system—heroically impenetrable to general ideas on any subject, equally incapable of telling a lie and of accepting any truth which wasn't securely birched or kicked into him before the mature age of, say, thirteen. The very irony of fate has sent him East. He can't make anything out of it. He never will. But he'll plod on diligently, perplexed and grumbling, through the long, scorching years till he is old enough to take his pension—unless he dies of sunstroke or malaria first—will espouse the first English girl who condescends to look at him, and proceed to increase the population by a regiment of small Hocklesses as red-headed, freckled, slow-brained and, let us hope, incorruptibly honest as himself."

"You seem to have made a comprehensive study of the peculiarities and prospects of these two young gentlemen," Mrs. Pereira remarked.

"They are the tools my masters give me to work with. Unless I know pretty thoroughly what stuff they are made of, how can I use them to advantage?"

"Do you subject all your friends and acquaintances to such searching analysis?" she inquired, smilingly. Then she could have slapped herself; for the question clearly invited reprisals. But this marking of time began to tell on her nerve.

"Not all," he answered. "Men are valuable to me in proportion as I have nothing further to discover about them. Just in as far as I understand a man I can get all the work of which he's capable out of him."

Colonel Verity made a rapid gesture with his left hand, as of large and slightly arrogant dismissal. He threw back his head, still watching his companion from beneath half-closed eyelids. His mouth was in great measure concealed by a soft, drooping and rather extravagantly long moustache. To Mrs. Pereira the expression of his face, seen thus foreshortened, was not only baffling but almost sinister. Looking at him, she was reminded of a falcon drawing back its head in act to strike.

"It is another matter where women are concerned," he added. "There I don't presume to dissect, still less to predict. The first is an impiety, the second a futility. In my opinion a woman is valuable—satisfies my ideal of her—in proportion as her motives defy analysis, as both they and she are outside the range of my masculine logic, are, in short, divinely improbable and inconsequent."

He lowered his head, his eyes wide open, curiously alight. His voice altered, growing hushed in footing the narrow line which divides reverence from license.

"You look remarkably lovely, my dear," he said. "Are you looking so intentionally, of set purpose?—I wonder. Have you any conception how dangerously lovely you do look?—Again I wonder."

Then, as she shrank away from him, astonished out of all power of pertinent reply, he turned abruptly and swung across to one of the great windows, the casements of which were set wide open on to the southern verandah. He stood there, his hands raised, resting upon the jamb on either side, a towering white figure against a rectangular space of darkness, his back to the lamp-lit room and to his guest.

"If only the whirlwind had not swept us asunder," he raged hoarsely. "If you had only waited. If I had only waited—cowardly, self-righteous hypocrite that I was!"

III

IT was not Charles Verity's habit to be inordinately surprised at anything—not even at himself. He, therefore, soon lifted his hands from the uprights of the window, stepped out on to the verandah and, to complete recovery, held brief converse with the night. His thoughts, if not agreeable, were at least conclusive. When he came back into the drawing-room his bearing and manner, though grave, were natural and unembarrassed.

Mrs. Pereira regained a normal condition less rapidly. Upon his return Colonel Verity found her still standing in the centre of the room. But she looked older than when he had left her; older, and, in a way, shrunken. Those engaging springs of animation and sprightliness had gone dry; with the consequence that her delicate features were drawn and sharpened, her lips thin as a thread. Unsuspected lines showed at the corners of her mouth and of her eyelids.

In the disarray of the last few minutes she had let fall her fan. Stooping to pick it up, Colonel Verity said:

"The air in here strikes rather dead. You would find it fresher and pleasanter outside. Shall we go for a stroll in the garden? You needn't be afraid. There is no chill. The wind has dropped."

To Henrietta such unqualified harking back to the commonplaces of ordinary intercourse proved almost as astonishing as her late projection into intercourse eminently the reverse of ordinary. She felt not only mentally,

but physically giddy, being shuttlecocked about in so unceremonious a fashion. For behind the words, now calmly and conventionally spoken, she caught the echo of other words extraordinarily different in emotional calibre and import—"If you had only waited! If I had only waited, cowardly, self-righteous hypocrite that I was!"—To bring those two utterances into line, and to bring her own understanding and judgment into line with both, was beyond her capacity. Social barriers had been recklessly cast down. In spirit she and he had been near to one another with the secret, yet violent, nearness of lovers. Now the barriers were up again, she and he stepping back into the position of little more than pleasant acquaintances, whose conversation all the world might hear and actions all the world might see. The episode took on the effect of a conjuring trick. This, moreover, without consent asked or given on her part, simply in obedience to the man's intention, simply because he willed it so to be.

Had Mrs. Pereira remained faithful to her own code of manners, her own slightly artificial standards of conduct, this prompt restoration of social barriers should have been welcome to her. But, so capricious, so incoherent, are—or, is it safer to say, *were*?—the workings of the feminine mind, that in point of fact she found such prompt restoration disappointing. The hoarse outcry, dragged unwillingly, as it seemed, from the depths of the man's heart, had moved her strangely. It was all wrong, of course, a thing objectionable and by no means to be encouraged; but it was enchanting also, drawing her irresistibly, as the glory of flame draws the moth. She fluttered towards this very attractive candle, only to have the said candle incontinently go out and leave her in the dark.

Yes, something suspiciously like a trick had been played on her. At this she would have felt furious, had her emotions been less shaken up and her pretty wits less sent astray.

With a hurried gesture she pressed her left hand over her eyes. She wanted to shut out the great room and its conflicting appeal, half Oriental, half European. Still more did she want to shut out sight and sense of the man who so attracted and disconcerted her. She found a difficulty in commanding not only her thought but her voice.

"Let us go out," she said at last. "Forgive me. Really I don't quite know what is the matter with me. I feel positively idiotic."

She tried to laugh. The result was a little noise unmusical as pathetic.

"I suppose I am overtired by my journey."

Colonel Verity hastened to make play with the statement.

"No wonder," he said. "It must have been abominably hot and dusty. And I am afraid the road, that last stage from Tanah, is in a villainous condition, cut to pieces with ruts and pocketed with wallows. Lugard reported badly on it a week ago and it cannot have improved in the interim. You must have found it frightfully rough."

As he spoke Colonel Verity took a lace shawl—lying across the back of a chair she had occupied earlier in the evening—and put it round Mrs. Pereira's shoulders. In so doing, as in giving her the fan, he carefully avoided touching her. Of this Henrietta was aware. She gathered up the train of her dress in one hand. With the other she held the shawl together across her bosom, glad the lace was sufficiently thick to conceal her bare neck and arms. She would have been glad to cover her face also. For a new-born modesty, trenching upon confusion, possessed her. She hailed the prospect of the night, there outside, in which she could neither clearly see nor be seen any longer.

"Take care of the steps," her host said, as the two crossed the verandah. "They are rather uneven, and

it is difficult to distinguish things first coming out from the light."

He walked beside her; but, save for this warning, made no attempt at help or guidance.

The night played Mrs. Pereira somewhat false. It provided further enchantment in plenty, but of concealment scant measure. The clarity of the atmosphere was extreme. The sky, tremulous with stars, spread a vast, close-set mosaic of diamond and sapphire. Under the bland, diffused radiance shed by it, all objects were perfectly visible; but in a relation and perspective different to that of day. Groves, lawns, flower borders, shrubberies, the mound and masonry of the well-head, seen in endless gradations of warm, soft black on black—from thinnest transparent film overlaying pale tree-trunk, blond pathway, dimly shining tank, or water conduit, to blottings of opaque, impenetrable shadow—resembled a picture by some Japanese "old master" drawn, and washed in, with Indian ink. The whole gained in fantastic effect from the semitropic character of much of the vegetation. Lianas, their stems and pendulous air-roots like hanks of tangled grey rope, immense fronds of palms and plantains, clumps of tall, ribbon-leaved bamboos, detached themselves arrestingly from growths of less exaggerated form and habit.

Of colour there was practically none; save where, looking across to the long irregular street of servants' dwellings, stables and outbuildings by the northern wall of the compound, red and yellow lantern lights ran to and fro; or where, looking back at the façade of the massive, square-built mansion, tempered brightness glimmered through gallery and verandah archways from lamp-lit rooms within.

In the East silence is unknown. The night is garrulous as the day, though the sentiment and substance of its speech is set in a more subtle and perhaps more ominous key.

At sunset the breeze had fallen, but wandering draughts

of air still moved now and again among the branches; mysterious, long-drawn exhalations as though age-weary Mother Earth sighed in her sleep. In the grass and low bushes countless insects shrilled, fiddled, creaked. About the tank frogs croaked and boomed an intermittent chorus. Great white owls hooted, sweeping over the lawns, while, hidden in thickly-wooded places, the little Scops owl repeated its melodious, tenderly plaintive note. Away at the stables a horse rattled its manger-chain sharply and stamped. Borne across the Maidan from the crowded, restless Native City came echoes of barbaric music, blare of conch and beat of drum. For March is the marriage month, through the days and nights of which high festival is held in honour of small boy bridegrooms and velvet-eyed baby brides.

Mrs. Pereira's appreciation of Nature was perfunctory. Landscapes were to her uninteresting, save as a background to figures. She preferred Bon Gaultier to Wordsworth, Thackeray to Walter Scott. Furniture, it is to be feared, meant more to her than mountains and seas, clothes than sunsets, trinkets than the immortal stars. But the windows of such soul as the pretty, skilful woman possessed stood wider open than usual, and at them the poetry of outward things did, in a measure, find entrance, as she paced the sandy garden path in the suave, enigmatic beauty of the Indian night. For once the larger relations of earthly life, its manifold exhibition of interests other than human, its incalculable demands and issues, penetrated this charming epicurean and egoist.

Presently Charles Verity spoke, again modifying the spirit of his and her intercourse and thereby inducing further surprises.

"I have always wanted you to know the history of my marriage. But it is a subject about which, for many reasons, I could not write."

His voice was even, his manner calm. Speaking he looked straight in front of him.

Henrietta's fingers closed more tightly on the folds of her lace shawl.

"Yes?" she said faintly.

"I have only wanted you to know that I did not go out to seek it," he continued. "It came to me unasked, literally as the fortune of war. Came as a duty I was just as much bound to accept and fulfil as any of the other many duties laid of me at that particular period. It didn't appear to me I had any choice in the matter."

Jealousy could not be numbered among Mrs. Pereira's sins; partly, no doubt, because, so far, she had suffered small provocation thereto. Yet, even in her present chastened humour, the subject of Colonel Verity's marriage piqued her. It acted as a challenge to her self-esteem, not to say her personal vanity; with the illogical result that she promptly felt more normal, more mistress both of herself and of the situation.

"Doesn't that sound just a trifle cold-blooded, my dear Commissioner?" she asked almost playfully.

"In many respects my marriage was cold-blooded," he answered. "That is rather the point of the story. I was not in love. But I was affected by the poor child's horrible friendlessness; and impressed—perhaps unduly impressed—by the circumstances which brought us together. I did not see how I could do less than marry her. As I say, the matter presented itself to me as duty which I could not stop to question or discuss—as part of the day's work, most of which just then was hot-blooded, not to say bloody, enough and to spare."

"Probably, since you married in fifty-seven. The date in itself is sufficient," Mrs. Pereira put in quickly.

Employment of a certain adjective struck her as superfluously realistic. She resented it. This tended to increase her self-possession. Her accent had a reproving edge to it. She carried herself once again with an alert and studied grace, as she stepped lightly along the straight

walk between the long borders of straggling, faintly fragrant, Bengal roses.

As she spoke Charles Verity turned his head and looked at her. But she refused to meet his eyes, concentrating all her attention upon the red and yellow lantern lights flitting to and fro in the region of the stables.

"You were good enough to speak of my over-scrupulous conscience this afternoon," he said, with an inflexion of irony. "Don't be under any misapprehension. In regard to war, at all events, I have no scruples. Not only is it my trade, but a trade in my opinion as honourable as it is ancient. I reverence it. I even rejoice in it—so long, that is, as it remains man's business only, in which women and children have no part. Here in fifty-seven, fifty-eight, women and children had rather terribly much part. That confused the issues, converting it from a war of just and necessary repression into one of vengeance. The satisfactions of vengeance are considerable."

His voice had warmed and deepened, become exultant. Now he checked himself, breaking off abruptly. Mrs. Pereira glanced at him, not because she wished to do so, but because she could not help herself, attraction and repulsion both compelling her. And, once more, she was reminded of some spare and shapely bird of prey—with fierce hooked beak; russet-grey eyes, steady and luminous, a living silence in them formidable and very sad; the eyelids smooth and thin, moulded to the eyeball, in effect insolent; the eyelashes straight, close-set and dark. Beautiful, undoubtedly, but exaggerated—a type, though noble and impressive, lending itself to caricature.

"Yes, they are considerable," he repeated, his utterance even once again and meditative. "They satisfy as strong drink satisfies; and, like it, they are bad for the soul. In every man worth the name there is a seam of cruelty—physical or moral. It doesn't matter which. The result in either case is pretty much the same. But

no man's character is improved by working that seam even in a righteous cause. It's so easy to lie to oneself, and justify the human male animal's inherent lust of power and of destruction by declaring, whatever the means, the end is good. I speak of that which I know—which I have done——”

For the second time Charles Verity checked himself.

Henrietta made no comment, neither did she look at him. She dared not. The countenance she had just seen, the words she now heard tallied too closely for comfort. She shivered inwardly, indeed, while distrust of this excursion to Bhutpur very strongly reasserted itself.

At the end of the straight walk Colonel Verity turned and the two moved slowly towards the house. A huffe of wind arose in the grove of big trees backing the lawn on the left. Leaves fluttered as though panic-stricken, wildly emulous of escape. Bellowing of conchs and dull thud of tom-toms, from within the Native City, sounded loud. Then, as the wind passed and noise of the instruments softened, upon the waste land behind the southern wall a solitary jackal yelped, calling the pack.

Colonel Verity paused.

“Listen,” he said. “There are the opening bars of the Anglo-Indian's evening hymn—the very soothing primæval lullaby with which, throughout the length and breadth of Hindustan, Cybele nightly sings us handful of presumptuous, sea-born Western adventurers to sleep.”

Again the jackal yelped. Its comrades answered, at first by twos and threes, then in full chorus, gathering from all quarters nearer and nearer, their cries waxing more discordant and vilely desolate. Yapping barks of greeting, consultation, snarling debate, and, just audible above the shrilling of the insects in the garden-grass, a quick dry pattering and scuffling of many feet; until, at last, the whole pack broke, yelling and wailing, hideously unanimous, as it streamed away across the sun-blistered

Maidan into the heart of the delicately radiant Eastern night.

"A choir of lost souls—of murdered innocents—of the toll of lives India levies on England, those who die in exile and never go back." Colonel Verity said: "Here I listen for it and loathe it. It means too much. All the same I know, if I survive—which I almost certainly shall, being tough—when the exile is ended and I go home, I shall hunger for the devilish music and fancy it sweet because it belongs to the years of work and of effort, not to the years of memory and retribution—miscalled years of rest."

He bent over Mrs. Pereira, regarding her steadily yet with a singular and very constraining gentleness.

"Come and sit with me in the verandah," he said. "I have given myself a holiday in your honour. We may not secure another evening to ourselves like this; and the lament we have just heard is fitting enough overture to the story of my dead son and my dead wife. Are you too tired? Shall I tell you, my dear, or not?"

"Yes, tell me," Mrs. Pereira answered.

The barriers were down again. She was moved, carried indeed somewhat out of herself. She let the folds of her lace shawl fall apart, and put her hand within his arm as they walked back to the house.

IV

"NICHOLSON was bringing reinforcements down to Delhi in August. The main body of troops were a day's march ahead. My force of about three hundred men closed the column. I had Carteret with me——"

"The ever faithful Carteret," Mrs. Pereira murmured affectionately.

"Yes—ever faithful, I own, though sometimes caught telling tales out of school."

"At worst an excess of devotion."

Colonel Verity settled himself back in the long colonia chair, his legs crossed, his hands clasped behind his head.

"You're very zealous in defence of Carteret."

"Possibly because Carteret is very zealous in the defence of—well—somebody else. But this is a frivolous digression—go on, my dear Commissioner—pray go on."

"I had Philip Enderby too——"

"Another ever faithful one."

"Yes—I can count a few men who love me," he said. "Little five-foot-nothing Billy Cranstoun, in command of a company of six-foot-anything Sikhs, was there also. You never met him, did you? He was shot through the head a month later during the assault. In Cranstoun we lost a remarkably promising soldier—extraordinary compound of judgment and bantam-cock pluck."

He paused.

"I was very much attached to Cranstoun. I miss him still."

"You are among the ever faithful yourself," Mrs. Pereira put in softly.

"In a way—yes, though I don't know that it makes much for happiness.—Well, as we got south down into the Plains the land was a quagmire, the atmosphere like the hot room of a Turkish bath. Physical conditions were trying enough; and details of what Havelock found—or rather didn't find—at Cawnpur had lately reached us, losing nothing of abomination, you may be sure, in transit. The men were in a queer sullen temper, difficult to handle. They brooded over the Cawnpur news in the fatigue and deadly heat until they'd neither reason nor mercy left. The sight of a turban raised Cain in them. They even showed an inclination to unfriendliness with the Sikhs, so that we had to be on the look-out for quarrels and keep them apart as much as possible. We'd halted early, two hours before midday—for both men and horses were fretful and slack from the bad roads and the heat—in a big mango-grove. Back of it, off the road, lay a good-sized village, the huts roofed, I remember, with red tiles. There was the usual Siva shrine and tank. The place struck me as very pretty and peaceful. The trees magnificent, their foliage so thick the ground beneath them remained quite dry."

He moved, sunk his chin upon his breast, and passed the palm of his left hand down slowly over his moustache and chin.

"I'd been thinking a great deal about you all the morning," he went on in a low, even voice.

Mrs. Pereira's silk skirts rustled slightly.

"Going over the time I was laid up in your house in Poonah with a broken ankle—you remember?—when it all began."

"I remember," Mrs. Pereira admitted, since he paused, evidently expecting an answer.

She felt troubled yet singularly elate.

"I kept on recollecting all sorts of quite simple everyday impressions—of you, of poor Adams, of the horses, the pets, the servants. Of the room you put me in; and the view from the windows over the great Dekhan campagna dotted with solitary mauve and pink temple-crowned hills shimmering in the winter sunshine. The air was like wine.—What wouldn't I have given for a mouthful of it that sweltering morning?—I kept on seeing everything—everything," he repeated. "And feeling it too—neither sensation nor vision were blunted—feeling it all as I felt it at first."

Elation coupled with alarm gained on Mrs. Pereira. She felt too excited to trust herself to speak.

"I had no end to do. For one has to be mother, nurse, schoolmaster, parson and more besides, if one is to keep those big, touchy, soldier-children in hand and get the best out of them which is to be got. I went through the usual routine. Inspected the camp. Saw that the younger men didn't tumble asleep from sheer exhaustion before they had eaten their rations. Saw that the horses were properly cared for. Visited the sick.—I'd a good many men down with fever, and more with bad feet galled and blistered from marching.—And all the time I was back with you at Poonah—the hopelessness, and, in a sense, the dishonour of the position eating into me like a cancer. The despair yet necessity of leaving you—leaving you while things were still essentially straight between us—lying upon me as a dead weight."

Pushed by a swift impulse of self-exculpation Henrietta leaned forward, her clasped hands outstretched.

"I never knew," she faltered. "I never realized——"

"Of course you didn't," he interrupted. "I did not mean you to realize. I was determined you shouldn't; and there anyhow I scored a success."

"Believe me, until to-day I never——" she began.

"I know, I know," he said. "That is as plain as the

sun in heaven. Don't vex yourself. I am under no delusion. All I ask you, my dear, is to abstain even to-day from realizing too clearly. Understand this is my affair, not yours—was so in the beginning and remains so still. I don't ask anything else. Didn't I thank God, this afternoon as soon as I saw you, that you had not changed by so much as the shadow of a shade? I meant exactly what I said. There's no question of explanation or self-justification on your part. Be just what you have always been—charming, sympathetic, interested, coquettish even if you will.—You are delicious like that.—But cold, my dear, just a little conveniently cold and indifferent at heart. Do you follow me? That's what I want. It's safest for us both.—Now listen. Let us return to the camp in the mango-grove seven years ago.

He stretched himself. Leant back in the long chair again and crossed his legs.

"As a rule I can keep the two sides of my life perfectly distinct," he went on. "I think of what I please when I please. I admit no compulsion in my thought. The business of my profession and of my private life never clash. But against the thought of you, sight of you, on that particular morning my will was powerless. It amounted to an obsession of which I could not rid myself. I had no reason to be anxious about you. I knew you and Adams were safe in England. Yet an idea grew on me that you were threatened with some injury, some indignity, for the infliction of which I was—somehow—responsible. I am not superstitious, but the idea haunted me to the point of torment. I could not get away from it; nor, for the life of me, could I make out what it meant. I have made out plainly enough since," he said, his voice deepening—"though never perhaps quite so plainly as sitting here, alone with you, in my own house to-night."

As he ceased speaking, Colonel Verity let his right arm drop along the arm of the chair, his hand lying open, palm upwards. And Mrs. Pereira did what she knew to

be foolish ; to be, indeed, wrong, since it passed the bounds of legitimate coquetry and touched on that which, as coquetry, is distinctly illegitimate. She made no comment, neither did she turn her head ; but, through the warm scented half-dark, her left hand felt out, found his hand and clasped it.

Silence, stillness, for a minute's space ; save that on the far side of Maidan, out by the mosque, jackals wailed in hideous chorus.

With a quick rustle Mrs. Pereira drew back.

" Yes—and then, and then ? " she asked impatiently.

Colonel Verity laughed softly under his breath.

" Already repentant ? " he asked. " Well—and then, and then, little Billy Cranstoun appeared as the messenger of fate. Your fate, my dear, and mine, my wife's fate ; and, incidentally, Damaris' fate likewise."

" I do not know that I have reason to be at all grateful to Mr. Cranstoun," Henrietta said.

" Ah ! there you open up a field of quite illimitable speculation. Profitless speculation—I've found it so, in any case ; and in these seven years for my sins I have devoted a mighty lot of thought to it.—I inspected Billy's section last. It lay apart on the side of the grove nearest the village. The cloud had broken and banked away to the south and the sun shone out. Men, horses, wagons, dispersed under the shade of those grand trees in the humming noonday quiet made a reposeful picture ; but directly I set eyes on Cranstoun I knew something serious was up. He looked—he always did—as spick and span as if he'd just come out of a band-box. Still there was a queer flicker about his eyes and the corners of his mouth which meant business. Some of his men, so he told me, had bought fruit and milk from the village people, one of whom reported European fugitives in hiding at a place four or five miles distant. Cranstoun had sent for the fellow and cross-questioned him, not without threats, I fancy, of hanging and burnings and kindred gaieties.

But the man stuck to his story, though he could give no definite information as to the number or status of the refugees. The report evidently rested on hearsay.—Nevertheless he professed himself able and willing to pilot us to the place where these poor creatures were said to be. The story, I own, struck me as improbable. Companies of disbanded sepoys had been hovering on our flanks for several days in amiable hope of murder and loot ; and this sounded uncommonly like some cock-and-bull story to entice a would-be rescue party into a trap. Our volunteer guide had an eye to profit. That one took for granted. But whether he proposed his services should be paid for by us, or by the gentry who waited a convenient opportunity for cutting our throats, was, in my opinion, an open question."

Colonel Verity stretched out his hand, pushed a little table aside and backed his chair against the wall, where neither lamplight from within or starlight from without fell on him. He sat bending forward, his elbows on the chair arms, his shoulders raised, his knees apart, staring absently at the floor between his feet.

To Mrs. Pereira, the long white figure, divined now rather than seen, assumed a spectral character. And, as she objected strongly to any and every thing approaching the supernatural, she found this unpleasant. She was conscious of a certain shrinking and awe as though called upon to hold converse with the naked spirit of the man rather than with the man normally, respectably, clothed in civilized garments and solid flesh. She shut her eyes. But that helped little. Shut or open, his presence equally affected her senses and her thought.

"I am not at all proud of myself in respect of that particular business," he said, an undercurrent of emotion perceptible in his tone. "Ordinary humanity, let alone ordinary sentiment, ought to have caught alight in me. In Crans-toun it had done so.—I saw he was on fire to be off, neck or nothing, in pursuit. But to my mind every conceivable

objection presented itself. To begin with I didn't credit the report. Rumours of the kind were always in the air. And in the present case where could the fugitives have come from? As far as I knew there was no English station within from eighty to a hundred miles. The story didn't wash—emphatically it didn't. And then my orders were to get my men down to Delhi punctually. Already we had lost time owing to the state of the roads and difficulties of transport for our sick. We were a good half-day further behind the main body than we ought, and I could not afford delay. Still less could I afford casualties. I remember looking at the sleeping men and feeding horses. It went sorely against my judgment to start even a handful of them on such a wild-goose chase.

"Still you went?" Mrs. Pereira said.

The masterful yet ghostly presence was getting upon her nerves badly.

"Oh! dear yes, I went," he declared, with reassuringly mundane bitterness. "Went, precisely because I disliked and disapproved of going. Went, out of a dirty fear of public opinion. Went, to prove to myself—and to others—that I was an amiably soft-hearted and imaginative person, not a callous, pig-headed brute. Went, I may add, tremendously to Cranstoun's disgust, for he coveted the job himself and was uncommonly sick at being told it was his place to stay behind and keep the peace in camp. If a silly thing has to be done I don't choose to put it off on younger men, but prefer to take the onus of the proceeding myself.

"It was hot," he went on, after a little, "infernally hot in the paths between the waist-high, often shoulder-high, crops. We moved at a walking pace on account of our guide.—A well-made fellow, well set up. He sported nothing but a turban, a loin cloth, and a long staff. Carried himself as if he had been drilled, which I own didn't increase my confidence in his good faith. I remember watching the play of the muscles of his back and thighs

under the smooth golden-brown skin as he swung along in front of me, through the prodigious green of the crops, and thinking what a handsome animal he was even if he did lead us to a stupid and purposeless death. Not that I, individually, cared much where he led me just then. A lively conviction of the inherent vanity of all things human was upon me ; together with that fear of evil about to befall you, and an unreasoning heart-sick longing for the room in your and poor Adams' house at Poonah and the delicious air of the Dekhan plateau. My grip on fact gave somewhat under that merciless vertical sun, I suppose, and I lost myself a bit. My ambitions, my career, even the taking of Delhi—beckoning so urgently there ahead—became of small moment. I would have forfeited them all, would have forfeited my eternal salvation to be back with you ; back, if only for an hour, in the beautiful unhappy days that were dead—that are dead, my dear—don't let us blink the truth—everlastingly dead, for both of us."

And, for the moment, Mrs. Pereira listening was transfixed by apprehension of immeasurable, irreparable loss ; apprehension of a fatality of circumstance against which native optimism tuned its perky little private] whistle-pipe altogether in vain.

V

"WE had covered about four miles when we came on a long winding strip of uncultivated land—once a main road. It showed traces of metalling and was furrowed by ancient wheel tracks. A herd of cattle and buffaloes strayed along it, tended by half-naked children. We struck the track at right angles, just opposite a group of big pipal trees rising out of thickets of scrub acacia. Our guide halted, saying, 'there'—pointing across the track—we should find what we sought; he himself could go no further, fearing to be accurst, since the place was an abode of evil spirits. He had fulfilled his engagement by bringing us thus far. Now he asked for his reward and to depart in peace.' But both reward and departure, as we informed him, must wait on events. I took my orderly and a couple of men, leaving the rest to look after the guide and the horses. We dismounted, for there was no forcing a horse through the prickly jungle growth."

Colonel Verity waited a little.

"A deserted dawk bungalow," he said—"in use when the road had been in use—overgrown with creepers, and hidden in the scrub. A ruinous verandah; and, opening off it, a single long room, so ill-lighted that at first I could not see whether it was inhabited or not. A great colony of bats was in possession of the roof. They hung in clusters from the rafters like bunches of monstrous grapes. The air was heavy with the musky stench of them, the

floor heaped with their excrement. It was a foul place. Then, at the far end of the room, where a remnant of ceiling cloth offered some protection from the falling filth, I found two English women—in rags, squalid rags of native clothing—and they were ladies, delicately nurtured, women of my own rank in life."

His voice failed, almost broke.

Mrs. Pereira remained silent. She was conscious of feeling no sympathy for the objects of his pity—none. The thought of them displeased her indeed to the confines of disgust.

"Mrs. Hackwood lay on the floor," he continued presently, "her head in Agnes' lap."

With small silken creakings Mrs. Pereira settled her pretty shoulders against the cushions of her chair, absently furled and unfurled her fan. This employment of the christian name annoyed her.

"As I knelt beside them, the dumb terror of the girl's face broke into recognition and happiness which confounded me. It cut me to the heart, because it stood for all a good woman believes of a man, asks from a man—stood for all that which the average man is not, and has not to give."

But humility, in this particular connection, was by no means to his hearer's taste.

"You exaggerate," she broke in, gently argumentative.—"That over-scrupulous conscience again! You do yourself an injustice which I really can't let pass without protest."

"Very charming of you—but I do myself no injustice," he answered. "The proof lies in the sequel. Hear me out, my dear, hear me out. Agnes called on her mother to look up and take comfort. She declared—and she repeated it later in evident good faith—that God, who had often sent me to her in dreams, now sent me in fact. She had waited, sure that I should come though she had no idea of my name or who I might be. Now I was here,

the trouble was ended, they were delivered, safe.—Her assurance and exaltation reacted on Mrs. Hackwood, giving her—for she was dying—unnatural strength. She sat up—and then—then—they both held me as two children might, laughing in their tender, confident content, stroking my uniform, kissing my hands, caressing, praising me—and all with a simplicity and innocence beyond question. The superb purity of it put me to shame.”

Colonel Verity leaned towards Mrs. Pereira, looking her full in the face through the soft gloom.

“I dwell on this, though it is a thing it goes against me to speak of even to you, because it is the key to all that which followed—the force which at once created and marred Agnes’ and my relation to one another. She idealized me, and so never knew me as I really am. There is a nemesis in such innocence, ignorance, perfect faith. They produce the unqualified belief, the unqualified demand, on the part of a woman towards a man, which so often plays havoc with married happiness.”

“Are you not just a little cynical?” Mrs. Pereira asked softly. Yet she rejoiced; her less worthy self naughtily jubilant. For the marriage, so it appeared, hadn’t proved a success. She began to feel quite nicely and kindly towards the late little Mrs. Charles Verity!

“Our journey back to camp seemed interminable. We improvised a litter, with poles and one of the shutters of that infernal bungalow, on which to carry Mrs. Hackwood. Some of the men took off their tunics to spread over it and to cover her. They behaved beautifully; were gentle, respectful, though cursing inwardly—at times audibly—that such things could be. They’d have given all they possessed for a decent excuse to string up the guide simply because he was a native. A brown man stank in their nostrils. They wanted to kill, and kill.

“I set Agnes on my horse, shortening the leathers until the soles of her bare feet reached the flat of the stirrup irons. She could ride—there was no doubt of

that—and she was calm and quite obedient. But, her first exaltation passed, one saw how physically weak she was. I had to walk one side, my orderly on the other, to keep her steady in the saddle. The men took turns carrying the litter. If we had been ambushed then there wouldn't have been the ghost of a chance for us, hampered as we were with the women and led horses. The nature of the ground compelled us to go very slowly; and, as it neared sunset, a clammy mist rose, oppressive and confusing to the sight."

Colonel Verity leaned forward, shading his eyes with his hand.

"All the same," he said, "I suppose I ought to have felt an overflowing thankfulness. Only, as it happened, I didn't. I felt horribly, hopelessly depressed; and fretted too. For we ought to have struck camp and marched a good two hours before. Now I doubted if it would be possible to move till dawn. The loss of time might be disastrous. And then, all the while, as I supported Agnes in the saddle, speaking to her now and again to cheer her and keep up her pluck, my mind still dwelt on you and on the old days at Poonah. For every step along those narrow, greasy field paths, between the crops in the reeking mist, seemed to take me further away from you, my dear, from you who alone I loved."

"Don't," Mrs. Pereira cried, quite sharply. "Pray don't. You pain me. It is wrong—a thing better not said."

"Far better not. Only, you see, I am out to tell the truth, and deliver my soul to-night. And that is an integral part of the truth, the keystone of the arch in point of fact. Only recollect, I speak exclusively of my own side of this matter. What I say commits you to nothing. Your side is different. I wish it to remain so. I repeat, I do not want you to change by so much as the shadow of a shade."

His accent and manner were half derisive, half appealing

"Be true to yourself, to your own nature—to the saving grace of coldness underlying your delicious coquetry. To it I pin my faith. For heaven's sake don't disappoint me.—And now this interlude is finished. Let us return to our narrative.—When we reached camp at last, the grove was on fire with the afterglow. Alive with men—crimson-dyed figures surging towards us through the crimson light. At first they stared at the little procession—the girl, barefooted and in rags, astride my charger, the rough litter, the led horses. Then, tumbling to what it meant, they began to cheer, and with that cheer came my one moment of unalloyed happiness. They shouted themselves hoarse. Roared, till the leaves of the great trees trembled overhead. All the tenderness, all the manhood, all the soul which was in them, the lust of war, the splendour of battle, the pity for child and woman tore at their throats. I gloried in my soldiers. They were a thing to hear, wholesome and good, satisfying one's hungry pride of country and of race."

As he spoke Charles Verity stood up, stepped out of the shadow—a being no longer spectral, but heroic, rather, in bearing and in stature, in the completeness and vigour of extremely masculine flesh and blood.

"Yes, verily the sound of them was good," he repeated, as he looked away over the luxuriant gardens, bathed in the bland radiance of the star-smothered night. "God of Battles, what wouldn't I give to hear it again! There's no sound on earth like it for casting out the devil who denies and doubts, for cleansing the mind of cant, and making life all of a piece, magnificently and indissolubly sane."

For a while he stood apparently forgetful of his hearer, lost in thought. Then with a lift of the shoulders and gesture as of farewell to memories—or were they prospects?—of splendid import, he turned, came back, pulled a chair forward and sat down beside Mrs. Pereira, laying his hand for an instant upon her knee.

"You poor dear," he said, smiling at her with a singu-

larly kindly yet half-mocking expression, "how infernally tired and bored you must be! Such is the reward of your charity in taking a two days' journey into the wilderness in search of me. Write me down the most selfish of egoists. I know I have held forth at unconscionable length. But with you here to listen, it was a sore temptation to break the silence of years and unburden my soul."

"I ask nothing better," she answered, smiling back at him prettily if somewhat pallidly, through the scented half-dark.

VI

INDUBITABLY Mrs. Pereira was tired in mind as well as in body. How could she be otherwise, having been led such an amazing dance? Still, tired or no, the dance fascinated her. Should her partner show disposition for another turn he would find her able and willing to keep her feet.

Curiosity and vanity alike were piqued. For that picture of the young girl on the big horse, amid the shouting troops in the afterglow, struck her as most superfluously romantic. It provoked a movement of jealous rivalry; so that she again felt not in the least amiably disposed towards the late Mrs. Verity. Indeed fortuitous circumstance appeared to have conferred altogether undue importance upon that young person. It was not fair. Henrietta reminded herself the bereaved husband intimated marriage had proved something of a failure. For that failure she could not pretend to entertain any regret. Yet, since to know the exact cause and manner of it would be interesting and possibly consolatory, she rallied her waning energies. By all means let the amazing dance continue! She was prepared not merely to support, but to invite another turn.

To that end she repeated her declaration.

"I ask nothing better than that you should tell me any and every thing you please. Surely you know how much I value your confidence? Isn't the giving of it the greatest compliment you can pay me? To be honest I came here rather in hopes of receiving it, didn't I?"

Colonel Verity's smile broadened.

"Ah! you are delicious," he said. "More than ever delicious; while I, in all probability, am an uncommon fool. But that last is immaterial, since I have a comfortable conviction that in the end my folly will recoil on nobody but myself. You see, I am very much alone here; set in authority, saying to one come and he comes, to another go and he goes. I am past the age when a man makes new friendships——"

"Don't grumble," Mrs. Pereira interrupted sweetly. "The man who will be king must pay the price of his kingship."

"In isolation?—Yes, I suppose so. Only isolation dries one up and dehumanizes one not a little."

"All the same you know you enjoy your kingship," she reasoned.

"Naturally I enjoy it. Isn't it what I have played for? And it is a man's life—living which I can meet death without self-contempt. I was sent here to rule. I do rule. What's more, I civilize. I make a very fair measure of justice and decency prevail. When I came, four years ago, law and order were practically a dead letter. To day life and property are—broadly speaking—as safe in the Bhutpur district as in one of the English home counties. For the first time, probably, in history the peasants plough their fields and gather in their harvest in peace. I had to do a little hanging to begin with——"

He paused, the character of his smile again changing. His eyes lit up, so it appeared to Mrs. Pereira, with a rather unholy flame.

"Yes, it was rough work at first. But the wiseacres, who preside over the destinies of India at home, gave me a free hand because they were scared. Eighteen forty-seven, forty-eight, taught them a lesson. Unfortunately they are beginning to forget that lesson. They've taken to interfering lately, pulling me up short, intimating that my methods hardly commend themselves to the

sensibility of the nineteenth-century conscience. Silly creatures, do they imagine they know better how to govern barbarian Asiatics—who, by the same token, they have never set eyes on—than I do who have spent more than half my life in India? Of course they don't—most assuredly the House of Commons doesn't. How, in the name of common sense, should they? All the same I know it's a mere matter of time, for I am plentifully envied and disliked. They'll interfere once too often. Then my reign will end—which possibly they may live to regret. If they attempt to clip my wings, straightway I resign—wash my hands of public life, with its countless intrigues, disappointments, black ingritudes; and retire to Deadham Hard, the little place on Marychurch Haven, in Hampshire, which my great-uncle, Clarkson Verity, left me when he died twelve years ago."

For a while Colonel Verity remained silent, his expression meditative, grave and somewhat sad.

"Oh! it's all as it should be," he went on presently. "The upward curve, which promises to land one on the very summit of achievement; and then, for all but two or three elect in each generation, the final irremediable drop. I am not among those two or three elect. I used to flatter myself I was. Now I know better. And so, until the ramshackle white house overlooking the tide-river claims whatever Indian administration has left of me, I rule and I intend to rule, without fear or favour, doing what is expedient in the sight of my own eyes. I am bound to pay for my power, as you remind me, in isolation—possibly in hatred. Very well, I accept that. It is worth the cost. Only at rare moments do I grudge the price."

Once more he laid his hand on Mrs. Pereira's knee, letting it rest there with a certain pressure.

"One of those grudging humours is upon me to-night. Your presence here, all it stands for in the way of memory, and the emotion it inevitably creates, makes me human

—rather too human perhaps. In proportion as a woman is sympathetic she is enervating, I suppose; and that is why I want to tell you about my wife, Agnes Hackwood—poor child—so that past events and the present situation may be quite intelligible as between you and me——”

“Yes,” Mrs. Pereira hurriedly acquiesced.

For she, too, became troubled by a melting mood, by a singular enervation new to her experience, and traceable—so she unwillingly suspected—to the pressure of the hand resting upon her knee. Curiosity gave place to alarm, driving her to protest against her own sensations, compelling her to remind herself—even more than her companion—of obligations just then, as it struck her, very much in jeopardy.

“Yes,” she repeated, “it is only right that I should understand—that—that you should speak to me quite candidly, for the sake of all concerned—all three of us.”

Charles Verity started just perceptibly, lifted his hand carefully from her knee, and gathered himself back in his chair.

All of which Henrietta noted, not without a sinking of the heart. She had offended him. He was angry. To her intense vexation, she recognized she had blundered into speaking tactlessly and crudely. For once in her life she felt acutely unhappy. It was impossible to explain that her object had been to bring herself, rather than him, to reason. To do so would be to give herself away; and, in the attempt to retrieve one mistake, risk the commission of another and greater. Hence, safety lay in maintaining the same attitude. Clumsily enough she had put him in the wrong. Now in the wrong he must stay. Therefore, as his silence continued, she remarked with an excellent assumption of composure:

“I am waiting, my dear Commissioner. Pray go on—let me hear the rest.”

Whereat his expression relaxed to one of rather grim amusement.

"I stand rebuked," he said. "I see I needn't have appealed to you not to disappoint me. I obey."

And, taking up the thread of his narrative, he proceeded to tell her, gravely and calmly, of the march through the steaming plains, south-eastward to Delhi, bands of mutineers harassing either flank of his little army. Of Mrs. Hackwood's death in the grey of the second dawn, before camp was struck; and of how, assured her child was in honourable keeping, she met the supreme summons with a sober joyfulness. For she had seen hell let loose in treachery—which sears the soul as a branding iron the body. Had seen husband, sons, friends, massacred—she and Agnes escaping as by a miracle; but escaping only to wander famished, terror-stricken, utterly desolate, until it seemed far preferable to have shared the swift, if bloody fate of those beloved ones who had already passed, from the tumult and cruelties of earth, to rest everlasting.

He told Mrs. Pereira further—and this to her but very moderate satisfaction—of Agnes Hackwood's dignity and fearlessness, alone in that assembly of fighting men. Of the girl's self-control and steadfastness, impressive in one so young and inexperienced—she, fresh from the mild respectabilities of an English country vicarage, having joined her parents in India only six months before. Told how the girl rode beside him, through merciless rain and sun, arrayed man-fashion in breeches and boots, shirt and jacket, supplied by Billy Cranstoun, he being small and his garments consequently nearest to her size. This done not out of bravado, but for modesty's sake; since the rags she wore barely covered her and since native clothing upon a white woman was an abomination then in English eyes.

Again he told Mrs. Pereira—this reverently, with a stern tenderness—how the young girl in her desolation, orphaned and friendless, turned to him, Charles Verity, with an absorbed devotion impossible to ignore. Her devotion was unobtrusive, restrained, untouched by hysteria;

but absolute as the worship of the devout for God. The whole current of her being set towards him the more positively because her nature was somewhat narrow, her powers of self-expression limited, her emotions few and profound. He observed the growth of this passion not without regret, hoping that, granted more normal conditions, it might pass away. But conditions in the refuge camp outside Delhi, during the weeks of the siege amid rattle of musketry and roar of cannon, were very far from normal, and it did not pass.

"Don't be under any misapprehension," Colonel Verity said. "Heaven forbid, I should create a wrong impression in speaking of her and so do her memory injustice. She made no advances, never gave her feelings away. Only, each time I snatched half an hour from a very different order of duties to visit her, I could not help seeing more and more plainly how matters stood. In war, when death is so evidently and hourly present, the future and what it may chance to hold drops out of count. All one's world is foreground and it seems futile as well as presumptuous to look ahead. This gives a queer moral twist to one's mind, prejudicing one rather strongly in favour of virtue and a conscience free of offence. A subtle form of cowardice and superstition—possibly? Still it works. Therefore, though I was not in love, I grew increasingly anxious to satisfy Agnes and make her happy if only for a few weeks—a few days only, as likely as not. I wanted to be sure, in any case, she was properly provided for, to leave her what I had to leave; to secure her a decent pension as my widow and also secure her the protection of my people at home—give her a child, may be, and thus fulfil her womanhood."

"You apparently reasoned out the position very thoroughly," Mrs. Pereira remarked in chilly accents.

"Yes, that is precisely what I did—I reasoned it out all round," he agreed, a blending of irony and of regret in his expression and in the tones of his voice. "I was seven-

and-thirty, you see, and it occurred to me I had done quite enough neighing after my neighbours' wives."

Mrs. Pereira winced, her pretty, tired face growing rigid.

"I had an idea that in marrying Agnes and making her happy I might do something towards paying off certain debts which I, in common with most men of my age and opportunities, are guilty of contracting towards your sex."

"Is it necessary——" Mrs. Pereira began.

"I think so," he replied. "Quite necessary, if our understanding is to be complete. As I tell you, I knew I wasn't in love; but, in my vanity and egoism, it never occurred to me I might fail to make Agnes happy on that account. I knew, once married, I could trust myself to be a faithful husband in word and deed, since her honour became my honour once she was my wife. I imagined that would be enough."

He turned his head, and for a few seconds looked Mrs. Pereira full and brilliantly in the face.

"There we have the list," he said. "First coward, then egoist—lastly hypocrite. And for this reason—you and Adams were in England; and, though he was so considerably my senior, his chances of life were immeasurably superior to mine as matters then stood. I gathered, from what Carteret told me, that Adams had decided to stay at home for good, superintending the management of the London banking house and letting Fillet and the other junior partners look after the branch banks in Poonah and Bombay. It seemed to me highly improbable you and I should ever meet again."

Colonel Verity paused.

"Now," he asked, "now do you understand?"

Henrietta rose to her feet. Her composure so deserted her that she came very near to tears.

"Yes—yes—I understand," she said. "But don't say hard things of yourself. You were generous, merciful, You did right."

Charles Verity also rose and stood looking down at her, smiling.

"And, as my reward, lost you? Six months after my wedding the news of poor Adams' death reached me. Less than a year before Agnes died, I heard of your second marriage. Verily I was had all round, my dear. Thus does Fate play chuck-farthing with the hearts and purposes of men!"

"I am very tired. Be kind. Stay here—I can't bear any more. Good-night—Yes, thanks, I know my way," Henrietta said.

VII

MRS. PEREIRA stood before the cheval glass, while Josepha Maria, her Goanese maid—Christian in name and creed, though Oriental by race and in costume—unlaced her stays. Petticoats, crinoline, blue silk dress skirt, lay on the floor in a circle about her feet; from out which very feminine barricade, clothed in fine lace and lawn under-garments, her form rose, fragile in effect as some delicately tinted Parian statuette.

Of this fragility, viewing her own image in the glass, she was aware. Aware that her face showed almost as white as her shift and thin to the point of emaciation; thereby offering sharp contrast to the nut-brown, splay-featured countenance of the native woman, as the latter, stationed behind her, moved to and fro drawing the long silken laces apart. Aware, moreover, that notwithstanding the warmth of the night a chill pervaded the room; a chill born of quite aggressive cleanliness, joined with the faintly stale and clinging odour of a place long untenanted and shut up.

This odour affected her unpleasantly. She could not forget it. On first entering the room before dinner, though the windows were then wide open, she had detected it. Now perception of it increased upon and pursued her, making her nervous as though some antagonistic influence lurked here, some presence shared the place with her whose enmity it behoved her to placate.

As Josepha Maria concluded the unlacing process,

setting slightly pinched waist and contracted ribs free, Henrietta gave a sigh of relief, stepped out of the circle of clothing and looked questioningly round the room.

It was square, large and lofty, the pictureless walls distempered in faded terra-cotta. A lamp stood on the dressing-table; another upon the escritoire placed between two of the shuttered windows, the casements of which opened down to the floor level. A large sofa, covered in dull yellow and red patterned cotton cloth, two monumental mahogany wardrobes, with blue glass knob handles to cupboards and drawers, and various chairs completed the furnishing. The bed, according to the custom of the tropics, occupied the centre of the room. Tall, slight pillars at either corner supported a frame carrying mosquito curtains. These, as Henrietta observed, were quite new, the net giving off a white dazzle in the lamp-light.

The room offered itself with all apparent candour to inspection. Severe and bare perhaps, save for the rich colours of an ancient Persian carpet spread before the dressing-table, but guiltless of concealments. Still Mrs. Pereira suffered unreasoning distrust of it—the natural consequence, as she strove to persuade herself, of extreme bodily fatigue and the agitating conversation in which she had recently taken part.

"Quick, Josepha, quick," she cried, "I am cold. Give me a dressing-gown. Not a flimsy muslin thing—the pink cashmere."

Then, as the maid wrapped the comfortable garment about her, she added:

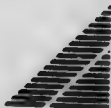
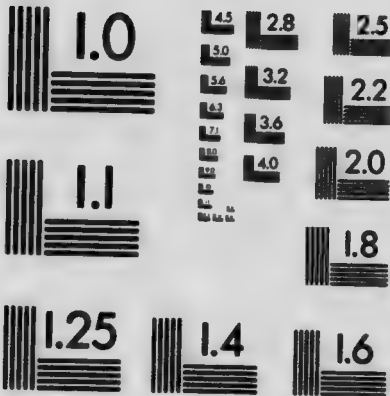
"Tell me, where do you sleep? Have you a room near by?"

"Nay, my lady," Josepha lamented, throwing up her hands. "This house is vast as a town. Through it you may walk and walk, till your strength runs from you like water. And the English soldier-widow-woman who rules over it in the name of the mighty Commissioner lord, has



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put me in a little chamber far away, but very far away in the servants' quarters, next door to that of Tulsi, the ayah."

"You made no complaint, I hope," Mrs. Pereira inquired anxiously. As between servants wars and rumours of wars are intolerably annoying.

"Nay, who am I that should complain?" Josepha returned, with a fine assumption of humility. "The chamber though mean is not uncleanly. Yet I reasoned with her, showing her it was very distant. If my lady should call for me in the night, having internal discomforts or necessities, how should I hear and come to her? Rather than my lady should call in vain would I lie on the ground at her door. But she was deaf to my reasoning, saying only 'thus it is ordered,' and left me."

Josepha bent down gathering together the scattered clothing.

"I like her not at all, this soldier-widow-woman. Her tongue is bitter and her eye envious. Moreover she is filled with anger towards us because of the word of the Commissioner Sahib, her master, that this room be made ready for my lady's visit. For is it not next to those in which she herself dwells with the beautiful and proud little Missibaba?"

Once the tap of Josepha's eloquence set running, it was far from easy to turn it off again.

"You talk too much and too freely," her mistress said, with rather half-hearted effort at repression.

"My lady asked and I did but answer. It is Tulsi, the ayah, who has told me these things. Many are those who receive hospitality in this house, great English officers and their ladies—what do I know?—yet to none save to my lady has this apartment ever been given. For it was the chosen room of the young wife of the Commissioner Sahib and none has been judged worthy to dwell in it since she and her baby son died."

Josepha ended on a high-pitched nasal note of triumph.

She spread the skirt of Mrs. Pereira's pretty dinner dress out on the sofa, folded and carried it across to one of the wardrobes; and pulling out a drawer laid it away with ceremonial smoothings.

"The apartments of the Commissioner Sahib are below. Rarely does he ascend the stairs unless the proud little Missibaba should be sick and cry for him. But to-day, very early, he stood there at the door looking in. And those who swept and spread carpets trembled, their livers being turned to water, for his countenance was terrible as that of one whom evil-spirits hunt."

She closed the drawer, which slid into place with the hush of planed wood against wood; and moving forward, picked the undulating dome of crinoline up off the floor.

"It is Tulsi, the ayah, who has told me those things," she resumed, the flow of her eloquence unabated. "But Tulsi is young; and the young oftentimes see and hear the thing which is not, being unripe in wisdom. Moreover, she bears no love towards the soldier-widow-woman, who is harsh with her and ill to please. It may be what she tells is but idle talk. What do I know?—But what ails my lady?" she cried, dropping the curtsying crinoline and hurrying to Mrs. Pereira. "For surely all is not well with her? She is pale, even as a lily fading in the drought."

"Yes—no—Josepha, don't be silly," Mrs. Pereira answered irritably. Poetry, she felt, was just now exasperatingly out of place. She sank down among the dull red and yellow sofa cushions. "Pray don't talk nonsense about fading lilies—I am quite well, of course. But I feel wretched all over, I'm absolutely worn out."

She passed her hands nervously across her forehead.

"It's nothing, of course. I shall be perfectly well in the morning—but, for goodness' sake, don't talk about fading lilies. Only you mustn't go away. I can't have you leave me."

She glanced at the bed, shrouded in that white dazzle of brand-new mosquito netting. The prospect of passing

the silent night hours in it was indescribably disagreeable to her.

"No, I can't have you leave me," she declared. "I must sleep or I shall be a perfect wreck to-morrow. And I'm convinced I shall not get a moment's sleep if I am here by myself."

"Nay, and who then can compel me to leave you? I care not for the words of the soldier-widow-woman," the other cried, enchanted at the turn of events. "Give me but time to fetch a cotton quilt; and see, I will lie there upon the couch, close at my lady's feet."

Yet, notwithstanding Josepha Maria's reassuring neighbourhood, it drew on towards morning before Mrs. Pereira found rest. Turned low, the lamp still burned upon the dressing-table. Around the glass globe of it, with miniature boomings and trumpetings, a cloud of insects pulsated; while in the dimness, within the tented space of netting, Henrietta lay, hour after hour, open-eyed, a prey to devouring thought.

Not being by nature of an introspective or meditative habit, the mental devourings in question proved abundantly unpleasant. The more so probably that, in its first conception, her visit to Bhutpur had presented itself as an act of retributive justice, an out-flanking of the enemy, very creditable to her ingenuity as to a domestic strategist.

Things had fallen out thus.—After a final, though friendly, refusal to be responsible for further payment of Captain John Knatchbull Pereira's gambling debts, she decided to give herself a temporary holiday from that plump and florid warrior's society. She felt a sudden distaste for the daily round of entertaining, of dinners, dances, and other amusements, in which she and he habitually participated, and a craving for change of ideas and of place. For once she would disregard convention and permit herself a mild escapade, leaving Pereira meanwhile to stew solitary in his juice. Her attitude towards her spouse was of a tolerant, slightly superior sort. When he eschewed

expensive follies, and did not dun her for money, she was really quite fond of him. He was good-hearted, if flabby in character and lacking in breeding. His faults, at worst, took their rise in a general inability to say "no"—a form of weakness which has, after all, an amiable side to it. Not for one moment did she deny that Pereira had excellent points.

Only recently, what with cards, dice and horses, he had really been a little too troublesome. His conduct invited, even demanded, reprisals. Absence would rapidly reduce him to order; since he did unquestionably, according to his capacity, worship the very ground on which she trod. Hence it occurred to her she might easily add a salutary sting to well-deserved chastisement by visiting a friend of the pre-Johnny Pereira period—a friend who had emerged from the ruck and notably made his mark. A friend, moreover, as she gave the unhappy Johnny gently though definitely to understand, whose personality had formerly attracted, and admiration formerly gratified her not a little.

Thus did the affair present itself to her at the start; the bringing to heel of an improvident husband its main object. But now, as she lay watching the cloud of booming, trumpeting insects denied suicide by the interposing lamp-glass, the affair offered new and inconvenient aspects. Light-heartedly enough she had sown the wind. Now she went in active fear of reaping the whirlwind—a harvest altogether foreign to her purpose. For she had proposed to enjoy herself, to be gracefully brilliant, self-sustained, just sufficiently touched and touching to give pretty point to the situation—beneficent castigation of Pereira always the motive of her action. At close quarters the situation confronted her with issues of a quite other than playfully flirtatious or playfully punitive description.

Thought carried her back to Charles Verity as she—then the very young, very petted wife of a middle-aged Bombay merchant banker—had first known him. He stood out from the men with whom she and her husband

usually associated, as better bred, better read, as of larger and nobler, though possibly unpractical, ideas and ambitions—as remarkably handsome, too, in a strange, romantic, accentuated fashion. Henrietta rode with him, danced with him, flirted with him. Only didn't fall in love with him because Chauncey Adams, her husband, being then solidly, wealthily and—where she herself was concerned—most munificently alive, it would have been the acme of bad taste and bad policy, let alone a wanton courting of social ruin, so to do. Thus may even worldliness do yeoman's service to virtue!

Since then she had grown up and Charles Verity had grown up likewise. The old charm remained, but how much had been added! For—and herein was the upsetting discovery, invalidating her preconceived position with the force of direct revelation—from the beginning he had cared for her more deeply and read her more accurately than she for a single instant supposed.

Throughout these seven years he had loved her as he had loved no other woman. Henrietta dwelt on the revelation exultant and flattered, yet in a sense indignant; since she perceived that, even while loving her uniquely, he had found time to analyse her character and note the defects in it. Upon those defects he counted to mitigate the inherent dangers of renewed intercourse, and frankly told her so! It was a policy bold, surely, to the point of cynicism thus to weigh her in the balances, find her wanting, and acclaim that same wantingness as safeguard against his own passion and her possible surrender?

To be at once convicted and desired was, to Mrs. Pereira, confusing in the highest degree. She did not know what to think, how to feel, still less how to act. All accredited landmarks seemed to be obliterated, the compass pitched overboard, the neat little insincerities and self-deceptions in which she habitually trusted put to the rout, leaving her helpless and shelterless in conflict with derisive fact.

Here Henrietta's nerves, strained by bodily fatigue and

the novelty of her emotions and surroundings, turned traitor and began to play tricks on her. She dozed off, only, on reaching the confines of unconsciousness, to start broad awake again, victim of some unexplained sound, real or imaginary. Creakings of furniture, faint knockings, furtive muffled footsteps passing back and forth on corridor within or gallery without, intermittent whispered conversations, mingled with the distant cry of jackals scouring the waste land, bodeful hooting of owls in the garden, and the sound of Josepha Maria's thick, regular breathing as she slumbered among the sofa cushions, wrapped in her cotton quilt.

And not only did Henrietta's ears thus betray her. Her eyes followed suit, so that the image of Agnes Hackwood—clothed masculine-fashion in breeches and boots of poor, gallant little Billy Cranstoun's—riding astride into the Refuge Camp outside Delhi to the tremendous music of the pounding guns, presented itself objectively, externally, against a background of terra-cotta coloured wall, mahogany wardrobe and white mosquito net. This followed by a further vision, felt rather than seen, of Agnes Verity, wife and mother, dying here in the sometime pleasure palace of Bhutpur, lying a corpse in the self-same bed where she—Henrietta—now lay, the corpse of her baby boy by her side.

Thereat once again indignation possessed her. For was it not a conception, at once idealistic and unsparingly practical, giving the key to Charles Verity's mind and character, thus to place her—Henrietta—the living woman whom he admittedly loved, under the protection of the dead wife, whom he had not loved, yet had revered and kept faith with? Whether his action took its rise in a refinement of chivalry, or in an astuteness of self-regarding caution trenching on insult, she was quite incapable to determine. He baffled her intelligence. He did more, he frightened her, being not only so much stronger, but more clear-sighted and resourceful than she was herself.

Frightened her, because she perceived that unless she could rise to heights of courage and seriousness altogether foreign to her nature, he held both her present and her future in the hollow of his hand.

And she shivered, all her body feeling light and weak, oddly far away from any comfortable warmth of the bed-clothes, penetrated by the chill of aggressive cleanliness, and that stale odour of a place long shut up and uninhabited, which pervaded this lofty, many-windowed room.

BOOK III

ADJUSTMENTS AND SPECULATIONS

I

INTUITION, insight, and the mystic fear which forever runs alongside them, may endure for the night, the waking night. But, granted a sound digestion and English parentage, common-sense—most useful and least spiritual of good qualities—can be trusted to take over control in the morning. The conscience-stricken, vision-racked seer of the small hours may be found drinking his, or her, early cup of tea in a spirit of contented optimism and opportunism, and this without any sensible dislocation of mental and moral processes.

Such was Henrietta Pereira's experience, gall'antry of outward nature successfully playing into the hands of inward reasonableness in the matter. For sunshine ample and splendid, air light and still sharp with the tang of dawn ; squawking and cawing of crows, and whinnying of kites from the house-top ; on the Maidan soldiers drilling bugles calling, horses neighing, drone and skirl of the pipes, hoarse-voiced word of command, and swishing tread of many feet over sand and coarse grasses—furnished forth the day, glittering brand-new from the mint of Time, to which she awoke.

She did not, could not, resist its encouraging influence, her hours of sleep though few having been sufficient to restore the balance of wasted nature, in other words, restore common-sense.

It is true that, just in the act of waking, as she stretched herself and passed the backs of her pretty hands across her still siumber-tied eyelids, vague impressions of untoward occurrences troubled her. But these, fuller consciousness

happily served to dissipate. In her present normal state of mind and body she could afford to laugh at her emotions of last night. She, indeed, felt quite ashamed of them as over-sentimental and "school-girly," a reading of altogether too serious meaning into looks exchanged and words said.

Either, so she told herself, she must have been exceedingly silly or exceedingly feverish—probably the latter, after her long journey in the heat. Fever, even a touch of it, distorts facts and obscures one's judgment—is a snare, caught in which one ceases to be entirely responsible for either feelings or actions. Therefore, though Charles Verity was all and more than all she had pictured him. Remarkably attractive, in fact, it would be foolish to take everything he said literally. Famous men, uplifted above the crowd as he was, are fond of playing at broken hearts. It is, rightly considered, an ingenious form of self-worship, softening the too obvious glare of personal success—an assumption of weakness delicately flattering to their profound conviction of their own unassailable strength!

Humour your great man, therefore, lending yourself with docility to his fiction of a broken heart. To do so is both a pleasing and admirably feminine occupation. Only have a care to your own peace of mind. Don't be duped by these lamentable tales of comminated cardiac fracture. For, rest assured, it is a breakage which its male victims—more particularly of the eminent sort—not only survive, but recover from completely and serenely enough.

Fortified by which very sensible reflections, Mrs. Pereira lay still for a while, in conscious enjoyment of the immediate present; inhaling the delicious air and listening idly to the clamour of birds and brave northern speech of the pipes. The mosquito curtains had been thrown back, and the western windows set open on to the arcaded gallery. The handsome room, flooded thus with freshness and with light, showed almost gay, antagonist influences, inimical presences banished, abolished by that triumphant morning gladness.

Most decidedly, Henrietta told herself, she had been little

short of a goose last night. Her first attitude in respect of this Bhutpur visit was the true, the correct one—namely, an agreeable change of scene and society for herself, which also supplied opportunity of teaching her plump and expensive husband a lesson calculated to do him an infinity of good.

She raised herself in the bed, and sat supported by the soft white pillows, smiling to herself as she tidied her hair and arranged the lace and pale ribbons of her nightdress, felt pleasantly hungry, hoped Joseph Maria would bring her little first breakfast soon. And then, unexpectedly, on a sudden she caught sight of a small, watchful figure, clothed in a clean, stiffly starched brown holland frock, stationed on the gallery by the middle window, attended by a stout, suspicious, sniffing, middle-aged dog.

"Nannie was cross. She told me not to come 'cause it would only 'sturve you. But I was obliged to come, to know for myself if it was true you was here. And now I know it is true, I won't 'sturve you any more, Henrietta. I am quite good. I'll go away d'reckly minute."

Damaris delivered this address in clear, detached accents, struggling a little over the christian name, the syllables of it even staccato, trippingly. Having finished, she shut her mouth tight, the upper lip lengthening, pressing on the lower one with a effect of fine determination. Nevertheless her eyes conveyed an immense longing, and were bright with the near neighbourhood of tears. She had passed her word. Honour demanded retirement; but honour represented a cruelly hard taskmaster just then.

Mrs. Pereira liked to generalize, to label. Thus she divided her feminine acquaintance into mother-women and wife-women, the former being largely in the majority. Granted certain not uncommon conditions, motherhood is inevitable. Nature sees to that. Wifehood is a more elaborate matter; which, save in the crudest sense of the word, connotes intelligence, foresight, humour, a nice application of means to ends. Mrs. Pereira herself belonged to the second category; not only in virtue of the two

marriages, but of the fact she had never borne a child or had been sensible of regret for her childlessness. The physical aspects of motherhood had always appeared to her as impeding, dangerous and unbecoming in the extreme; while she had not been sufficiently in love to feel infant replicas of either husband at all essential to her personal happiness.

But Damaris Verity's baby face, so eloquent of stern resolve and fond desire, appealed to her more deeply than was welcome. It pulled at her heart-strings. This she did not approve. It made her uneasy, thereby threatening the security of her recovered optimism.

Half annoyed, she turned on her elbow—which dented a cup-like depression in the smooth glossy surface of the pillow-case—the better to observe her visitor before answering. So doing, the singular likeness between Colonel Verity and this small daughter of his struck her anew. She really found it difficult to disjoin the two and think of either separately. It was as though they presented different aspects of one and the same person. Whereupon a curious psychological question occurred to her. Was it conceivable that Agnes Hackwood's adoration of her husband had been too absorbed and absorbing to admit of her transmitting anything of her own personality to the child whom he gave her? Henrietta entertained the idea with mingled interest and repulsion; such extinction of individuality, through the operation of love, being very impossible to her own brilliantly concrete nature and attitude.

Practically, moreover, it tended to increase her uneasiness and revive the exploded perplexities of last night. For if, as she had so recently convinced herself, sceptical common sense must henceforth rule her intercourse with the father, must it not rule her intercourse with the daughter likewise? There must be no weakening, no undue sentiment in relation to this strange little other self of Charles Verity's. It must be discouraged from pulling at her heart-strings. She felt glad she had never

cared much about children; for, to a mother-woman, this child, with its profound luminous eyes and their dark shading, its proud fierce little nose and sensitive mouth, would prove irresistibly engaging.

"But you know, Damaris, it is rather naughty to disobey your poor Nannie like this," she began in admonitory style. "Suppose she is looking for you now, looking everywhere except here, where she forbade you to come. Really, my dear child, I think you ought to trot back to the nursery and tell your poor good——"

At this point Mrs. Pereira's moral discourse suffered interruption. For in turning upon her side, the bed-clothes being somewhat displaced, the lines of her graceful person were disclosed to the hips through her clinging nightdress. Her sleeve, slipping up, left the arm on which she rested bare. Her hair hung in loose curls over her shoulders and framed her delicate face, upon which sleep bestowed youthful softness and bloom. Damaris gazed in wonder, until resolve and yearning gave place to overmastering delight. She patted the palms of her hands together rapturously, squeezed them between her knees, her little back hunched up, waving to and fro shaken by an ecstasy of laughter.

"Oh! you are so pretty, so beautiful, beautiful pretty," she cried. "I never thought anybody looked like you do, in bed, without their fart gowns on."

She moved forward a few steps and stood still, her hands clasped, her head advanced, observant, bird-like, a little on one side.

"I am a dreadful long way off here, Henrietta," she said, in tone of gentle argument. "Would it 'sturve you very much if I came nearer, just one tiny minute, and saw more close? Afterwards I promise I'll go away to Nannie again, d'reckly, quite good."

Mrs. Pereira appreciated her own beauty—as what sane human being possessing beauty does not? She enjoyed the power conferred by it, taking admiration and

compliment as pleasant matters of course. But, for some cause, no recognition or praise had ever affected her as this did. The spontaneity and sincerity of the tribute, even while charming her, put her to shame, so that she shrank from it, flushing, the blood tingling through her to the very finger tips. Sitting up straight she gathered the bed-clothes high and turned away her head.

Flight of small feet across the carpet, scamper of a dog, and Damaris' voice there right beside her, passionate in appealing despair.

"Oh! I didn't ought to have laughed, but I was so happy I couldn't help it. I wasn't being rude, Henrietta, indeed, indeed I wasn't. I laughed 'cause I loved you so. And 'cause you are so pretty. And 'cause I'd been so afraid I wouldn't find you in the morning; and that you living here with me and the Commissioner Sahib was only a make-up of my own thinkings and pretend."

Mrs. Pereira felt the push of the little girl's slender body against the mattress as she flung herself forward, her arms extended, her head thrown back, a fury of repentance and protest possessing her too violent for any weakness of tears.

"I'm not naughty, Henrietta," she repeated, while Jessie the fox terrier, standing on its hind legs, its fore-paws planted against the bed-rail, howled and yapped. "'Deed, I'm not naughty. I only wanted to know for sure you was here quite real. Tell me, oh, please tell me, you won't be cross because I laughed—I was obliged to laugh when I felt so beautiful glad. Tell me you aren't cross, and then I won't 'sturve you any more. I'll go back to Nannie d'reckly quite good."

Whereupon Mrs. Pereira surrendered, wife-woman though she was. Or might it be for that very reason she surrendered, since likeness between child and father were so singularly and perplexingly great?—She didn't know. She obstinately refused to make any attempt to know, taking up the position that all investigations were strictly forbidden by overruling common sense under this particular head.

II

WHEN no more exciting form of amusement offered it was the custom of European society at Bhutpur, military and civilian, to drive out in the late afternoon beyond the Civil Lines, to a bluff overlooking the river, known indifferently as Chandra Devas Fort and Scandal Point. There, in its divers and sundry wheeled vehicles, to sit, "eat the air" and survey the limitless, featureless landscape.

Upon the surface of so immense a plain even a trumpery elevation gives a sense of freedom and relief—hence the attraction of this somewhat arid spot. On the landward side the slope rises very gradually to a bare extended platform, carrying on the right—looking across the Maidan to the native city—the remains of ancient ramparts and a bastion. On the river front the sheer drop, of seventy to eighty feet, shows a rough striated cliff-face of amber-coloured sandstone, the base of it riddled with uncleanly little caves. Nearly opposite, crowning the river-bank, the pink squat steeple and open cloister of a Hindu temple stand, backed by a group of palms and mango trees. In front of it the burning ghaut descends by a series of shallow, brick-built terraces to the bistre-green, slow-flowing waters of the mighty stream.

The scene is at once vast, laboured, empty, in a way relentless, under the prodigious vault of the Indian sky—an earth grudging and of little mercy, below a heaven peopled by vengeful and exacting gods.

These forbidding characteristics failed, however, to discourage the company gathered at Chandra Devas Fort one evening, towards sundown, within the week of Mrs. Pereira's coming to Bhutpur. Happily, for the solidarity of our empire and our race, the average Anglo-Saxon, sixty years ago, was as impervious to the influence of alien places as to that of general ideas. He carted his inherent parochialism along with him over the surface of the globe; and exhibited it as complacently in the heart of Asia as in the immediate neighbourhood of his native village pump. Herein lay the secret of his driving power, the secret alike of his failures and of his strength.

The whole station had turned out. Everyone who counted was present; plus certain socially fringy families, who distinctly did not count, and were consequently, in the opinion of the rest, quite unpardonably and offensively out of place. Yet by just so much was their presence valuable; since a gathering wherein there is no one to cut or to snub lacks sadly in incident and in point. The carriages, drawn up on either side the roadway, ranged from a regimental brake with a well-matched team of Australian-bred horses to a needy subaltern's obviously second-hand two-wheeled cart. From Mrs. (General) Fulleylove's showy, Calcutta-built britzska and Mrs. (Judge) Mackinder's roomy barouche, to the dilapidated nondescript pony-chaise in which Nicholas Poltimore Mountnessing—the Eurasian auctioneer and furniture dealer—was wont, on festive occasions, to take his inert untidy wife and brood of greasy olive-green children "out to ride."

Lean, bare-legged, turbaned grooms—save in the case of the Mountnessings, where a precociously licentious-looking fourteen-year-old son of the house had been detailed for service—squatted on the ground in front of their respective horses, armed with long-handled fly-flaps. Gentlemen alighting, strolled from carriage to carriage, or stood in twos and threes talking. The ladies

remained seated—a parterre of pale-coloured dresses, hats and parasols—exchanged greetings and perfunctory remarks with such other ladies as were within earshot, brightening and bridling visibly when any man, detaching himself from his fellows, approached with purpose of conversation.

Confused sound of voices, crunch of wheels, creak of harness, stamp of fly-pestered horses, now and again the shrill challenge of a couple of stallions spoiling for a fight, rose, hung, and drifted out across the Maidan in the hot evening air.

Colonel Waterhouse—punch-like in face and in figure, minus the hump—clothed in a light check suit, his black bowler tipped very much on one side, sauntered slowly away from a little knot of men, whom he left looking one another in the eye and laughing consumedly, in the direction of Mrs. Mackinder's carriage. The afterglow of a warm story, well told and well received, still irradiated his countenance as, leaning his elbows on the top of the barouche door, he addressed that lady.

"So I hear you decided to take the plunge—Good-day, Mrs. Gardiner, hope the Padre is flourishing?"—this to the wife of the Government chaplain. "Take the plunge, you know, do the civil thing and call on the enigmatic fair stranger. Is it permitted to congratulate you on that happy union of charity and diplomacy—dove and serpent?"

He raised his hat, replacing it at an even acuter angle, while his glance melted from gallant to tender.

"If only more women were like you."

"Diplomacy would be at a disadvantage, for one thing."

"And bachelors, as a species, extinct."

Mrs. Mackinder—large-boned, rather masculine-looking, verging on fifty, tall, thin, straight as a ramrod, well bred—was she not a Baillie of Blairgowan?—her eyes frank and humorous, her face, resembling in colour a well-travelled cowhide portmanteau, surmounted by an

auriole of stiff, crinkled, copper-red hair now going grey—looked at him in critical amusement.

"You are very expansive this afternoon," she remarked. "A sure sign you have just been saying something you ought to be heartily ashamed of.—About the Sultan-i-bagh—there was nothing else to be done. It was Mrs. Fulleylove's place to call first of course. I saw her and told her so. But you know how dilatory she is. Work as I might I could not get her to move, so I had to go myself! There are always odds and ends of little people one could name, on the look-out for an opportunity of pushing themselves; and in common civility to the Commissioner I couldn't let them rush in while we, heads of houses, held off. It wouldn't have done at all.—Really it is a misfortune for any Station to have a person in Mrs. Fulleylove's position who cannot be induced to assert herself and take the lead. I don't want to speak evil of dignities, but she is rather hopelessly useless."

"More particularly where enigmatic fair strangers are concerned?—Ah well, poor lady, possibly she has her reasons for shying."

Colonel Waterhouse drew his mouth down at one corner and looked suggestively at Mrs. Mackinder.

"Fulleylove has an eagle eye for a pretty woman."

Whereupon the lady addressed skilfully shifted her parasol, slanting it forward the more effectually to exclude her companion from participation in the conversation. In the kindness of her heart she had brought Mrs. Gardiner out driving. She repented her virtuous action; for, admittedly, there were subjects "one didn't discuss before Mrs. Gardiner," and some of those subjects happened to be exactly the ones she desired most to discuss at the present moment.

"Then you have met Mrs. Pereira?" she asked.

Colonel Waterhouse shook his head.

"Not deemed worthy to enter the presence, my dear lady. Two days ago I went to pay my respects to Verity

—invisible. Asked for my little crony, Miss Damaris—also invisible. Determined not to be sent altogether empty away, I humbled myself so far as to inquire if young Lugard was on hand—out. The other boy, Hockless—out too. All of which gave me rather furiously to think."

"I found Mrs. Pereira charming," Mrs. Mackinder asserted, with perhaps unnecessary loudness. "Agreeable, remarkably well dressed and pretty, *petite*, Dresden-china style, don't you know."

"I might have known if the door had not been so conspicuously shut in my face. As it is!—But, between ourselves, what beats me"—his expression became notably merry—"is that Verity, our great and impeccable Verity of all men living, should play this gay little comedy off on us!"

"Hush! Pray don't," the lady said under her breath.

For here Mrs. Gardiner refused further eclipse. Bending forward she projected a triangle of white forehead flanked by smooth, looped window-curtains of pale auburn hair, a pointed chin, faded mauve bonnet-strings tied modestly beneath it, along with a fixed smile revealing in full the upper and lower range of teeth and gums, below the fringe-garnished edge of the barrier parasol.

"Did I understand you to speak of a comedy, Colonel Waterhouse?" she inquired. "We had not heard private theatricals were to be given at the Sultan-i-bagh."

"Not heard?—Well, no doubt Colonel Verity will take the first opportunity of sounding the Padre, Mrs. Gardiner. The ecclesiastical sanction and approval——"

"Oh! there are the Hobday girls," Mrs. Mackinder broke in with much presence of mind. "They're great friends of yours, aren't they, Mrs. Gardiner. I don't know what you think, but in my opinion it would have been far wiser if Major Hobday had left them at home in the care of relations. Unmarried girls with no regular chaperon are out of place at an Indian station. It is

neither good for themselves or for other people. I hear the Hobdays are running dreadfully wild. Their father seems to have no control over them whatever. It's a thousand pities. Look, Mrs. Gardiner, surely they are driving another new pony?"

"I am afraid I am sadly ignorant about horses, dear Mrs. Mackinder"—this in deprecativè accents. "You see our own income has never permitted our keeping a carriage." Then to Waterhouse: "I am very pleased to hear the Commissioner would wish for my husband's advice as to any theatrical performance which might be given at the Sultan-i-bagh. With earnest thought and care such entertainments can, no doubt, be made unobjectionable, and I am sure——"

"Certainly that's a new pony," Mrs. Mackinder pursued loudly. "They've been driving the brown they bought from Captain Daly, when he exchanged and went to Madras in December; and this is a chestnut."

She held up a pair of folding, gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

"Do you recognize the animal, Colonel? I don't. Nicely shaped and very good action; but a perfect bundle of nerves. That elder Hobday girl's hand on a horse is disgracefully hard."

"So it is on poor old Hobday, I fancy. Dashing young person, Miss Imogen. Doesn't by any means drive papa on the snaffle. By the way, has she given our great and impeccable One's affections up for lost since the advent of the enigmatic fair stranger, I wonder?"

"Pray don't," Mrs. Mackinder said in a rapid aside. "You are positively incorrigible."

"But must we not all feel so many excuses should be made for a young girl deprived of a mother's loving sympathy and counsel?"

Mrs. Gardiner's speech usually took the form of insinuating inquiry rather than direct statement of opinion—a mean habit, since it shifts the onus of affirmation on to others.

"Unquestionably, my dear madam, when you can be sure of the mother. Only, once upon a time, I grieve to relate, little stories did go about to the effect that the late Mrs. Hobday was somewhat large-hearted. Didn't keep her loving sympathy as exclusively for home consumption, you know, as might have been——"

But here, true to her creed that "one doesn't discuss certain subjects" before the wife of the Government chaplain, Mrs. Mackinder interposed in her grandest Baillie of Blairgowan manner. She regretted the necessity of having recourse to that protective weapon on the present occasion; but if Waterhouse was thereby offended, offended he must be. She had no option in the matter.

"That will do. That will do," she declared. "Whatever her faults the poor woman is dead and buried. It is unprofitable to dig her—or stories about her—up again. I can't pretend I ever liked her. She was underbred and not as white as she might have been; but that doesn't prove all the scandalous things people said about her were true. It is so easy to gossip."

"I am very glad to hear you say that, very glad." Mrs. Gardiner's fixed smile became aggressively prominent. Her gums positively glistened. "Because recently I have felt so anxious—as I am sure you must have too, Mrs. Mackinder—about that dear motherless mite, Damaris Verity. Children are so impressionable—I know it with my own little ones. It should be, don't you think, our most earnest effort to shield their innocence from every appearance of evil? I talk from time to time with Mrs. Watson, little Damaris' nurse—a superior person for one in her position, and truly religious. She is reticent, but she cannot altogether hide her fears and——"

Mrs. Mackinder, though her eyesight at such close quarters was excellent, turned the gold-rimmed eyeglasses upon the speaker as she might have turned a machine gun.

"I do not follow you," she said. "I am sorry, but I do not in the least follow you. Colonel Waterhouse and

I were speaking of the Miss Hobdays. And what connection they and their running wild has with Damaris Verity's nurse, I fail to perceive. We agree, I think, gossip is objectionable; but gossip picked up through servants appears to me specially so. To encourage it is, in my opinion, to put a premium on treachery. Take care, my dear Colonel. Look out for that pony-cart or you'll be run over. Really I never saw such reckless driving in my life."

III

MUCH to the alarm of her younger sister, Miss Kitty, to the annoyance of Colonel Waterhouse, whom she compelled to scuttle with undignified precipitation out of the roadway, and to the utter distraction of the nervous chestnut pony, Imogen Hobday, by means of persistent sidling and backing, had contrived to range her dog-cart alongside the regimental brake near which Maurice Lugard and James Hockless were standing.

"I say," she called to the young men, "are you two available on Thursday? We've people coming to dinner. No grannies, just our own set. Father'll trot over and dine at the club. After dinner we're going to have a little hop. It'll be no end of a lark."

"I beg your pardon—were you speaking to me, Miss Hobday?"

Lugard's expression reached the perfection of bland and civil innocence.

"Dinner and a small dance? It's awfully kind of you. Nothing I should like better, I'm sure. But the fates are against me; I'm booked for Thursday already, worse luck, and I'm afraid Hockless is too. Dinner and dance at Major Hobday's on Thursday, Jimmy—are you free?"

Hockless stared down the long road to where, upon the eastern confines of the Maidan, the avenue of tamarind trees showed a tunnel of misty green against the blondness of the sandy waste. He turned blue eyes, vague, red

rimmed as with tears or sleeplessness, and a harassed, puckered countenance upon his interlocutor.

"A dance, Thursday?" he said. "Oh! I'm off dances. If you want to go you'll have to go alone, Lugard. I can't go. I'm busy."

Imogen Hobday looked sharply at the speaker. Her temper rose, in sign whereof her eyebrows drew into a straight black bar across her forehead, under the brim of her white sun-hat. A young woman of opulent contours—prophesying early and rather coarse maturity—the general effect of her now was vivid, her colouring superb in pale golden brown and cherry red, her large eyes at once brilliant and opaque, her pouting lips moist and passionate.

"What a beastly nuisance," she said, fighting down more explicit declaration of anger and still studying Hockless. "But as you're so particularly busy Thursday, we'll arrange for Friday instead. I can count on the others. They'd throw over engagements. They don't need such a tremendous amount of pressing to come to us. And I'll get father to dine out just the same. I'll tell him it isn't convenient to me to feed him at home, poor old boy. He must change his day at the club."

"But you know, Imogen, he told you he'd asked Dr. McCabe and Major Willson and old Ponting on Friday, to come in for a rubber of whist," Kitty protested, in a high, fretful, sing-song voice.

"He never told me anything of the kind. He may have told you and you probably forgot to pass it on. You usually do forget messages. Anyway, I shan't alter my plans. If he wants his whist he must have it at the club. It serves him right for asking people without finding out whether it is convenient to me first. It can't make any difference to such old fossils as Major Willson and Ponting. Their evenings aren't much in request. Hardly anyone ever invites them out."

The girl laughed, showing the hard whiteness of rather large and perfectly even teeth.

"I hope you observe how I'm upsetting everybody's plans and getting myself into hot water all round for your and Mr. Hockless' sake, Mr. Lugard?" she went on. "So don't you dare to throw me over. That would be a little too mean of you—a deadly offence. I'll never forgive you if you back out."

Lugard placed his right hand on the top of the splash-board, his right foot on the step, thus bringing himself into closer proximity to the young lady. So doing he was conscious of the exciting quality of her ripe animal beauty; but it impressed without attracting him. He found it too obvious, suggestive of possible surfeit. For this, being by nature chivalrous, he in his secret soul asked her pardon, smiling at her meanwhile with a certain whimsical penitence.

"Not for the wide world would I disappoint you, Miss Imogen," he said, "were I my own master. But you must remember I'm only a miserable hireling chained to the official ink-pot. Friday's no more possible than Thursday; for we're up to our eyes, not in agreeable frivolities, but in bitter hard work—famine statistics, irrigation schemes and such like. And no malingering, no shirking permitted, I promise you! The chief is as adamant. It's fairly breaking my heart to be telling you, but, for the next week or two, till the worst of the worry is cleared, there'll be no holidays for Hockless or myself. You must just count us out, to our sorrow."

"If you flatter yourself you are taking me in you're making a mistake, Mr. Lugard," the girl answered. Rage and jealousy surged up in her. And a deeper, more subtle emotion than these, namely, suspicion of rejection covering far more than her poor little invitation to dinner and a dance. "Don't flatter yourself! I'm as blind as all that. I see through your rubbishy excuses about hard work. The simple truth is you are both playing tame cat to this

wonderful Mrs. Pereira and dancing attendance on her day and night."

"No, it isn't," Hockless blurted out. "You're utterly wrong, Miss Hobday. Nothing of the kind. I—I only wish to goodness it was."

"Hark at him!" the girl cried, laughing again and not pleasantly. "You heard what he said? Isn't that proof enough?"

As she spoke, she flicked the pony's head with the whip-lash. It winced and swerved, moving its hind quarters viciously under the kicking strap. Lugard retired from the vicinity of step and splash-board; while Captain Dewsbery, from the box-seat of the brake, drawled throatily:

"Beg pardon, Miss Hobday, but, by Jove, you know, if you don't exercise more caution you'll have the tail of that cart bang in my wheelers."

"No fault of mine if you persist in taking up so much room with that old caravan of yours," Imogen shot back.

Then lowering her voice and leaning over the side of the dog-cart she addressed Lugard again.

"There, don't be cross. I'm sure I've no wish to quarrel. But I don't know what possesses all you people at the Sultan-i-bagh. Old friends seem to count for nothing. And after all, what is this Mrs. Pereira? Of course I can see she's fashionable; but anyone can dress well if they've money enough. And if she is rich it's only because she was bought and paid for by her Number One—an old shopkeeper—grocer, draper, candlestick maker. There are some girls, you know, Mr. Lugard, who would hardly care to wear French gowns at that price."

"You're all wrong, Miss Hobday," Hockless burst in, furious. "Adams, Drummond and Company is about the oldest and biggest banking house in Bombay, and Mrs. Pereira's husband was senior partner."

"Fancy! How thrilling," she replied, finely sarcastic.

"But I don't pretend to know much about the Bombay side. We always come out by Calcutta. Anyhow, Mr. Hockless, you can't pretend Number Two amounts to very much. We met some Pereiras once in the hills and they were perfectly awful. Came from Travancore or some hole of that sort. They gave out they were Portuguese, but they were as black as your hat really."

Once more she flicked at the pony's head. Once more the pony swerved, shaking itself savagely, while the foam, dripping from its bit, had ugly red flakes and stains in it. And once more Hockless rushed headlong into speech.

"You're totally mistaken again, Miss Hobday. It can't be the same family. This Captain Pereira's as white as you are yourself," he asserted, thereby dealing a nastier blow than he intended. "I know all about him. His people have an awfully nice house at Tullingworth where my mother and sisters live. His father's a most gentlemanlike old chap, quite in the best set. Everybody knows him."

Then, with a sort of gulp, Hockless turned his back on her and stared away down the long sandy road, his boyish face going first livid then fiery red under freckles and sunburn. For a dark object emerged from the mouth of the misty green tunnel into the full glare of the level sunshine. It drew his eyes and thoughts as with a magnet. And it travelled rapidly, casting the gigantic, blue-black shadow of a man, of horses, and of a high, oddly-shaped carriage far across the surface of the plain.

IV

COLONEL VERITY brought the mail-phaeton up between the file of stationary vehicles at a smart pace. Sweeping it round to the right at the edge of the plateau where, in common avoidance of possible accident, some twenty-foot space remained untenanted, he drew up. Two grooms swung themselves down off the back seat, and running to the horses' heads stood motionless—the whole equipage showing in profile, uplifted as on the extreme verge of solid things against immense distances of sun-blurred landscape.

Not unfrequently Charles Verity's presence, bearing as it did small relation to peaceful parochialisms of the village pump order, acted as a disturbing element. It induced a questioning of accepted values, a distrust of the conventional and commonplace unwelcome to the sluggish Anglo-Saxon intelligence. By inherent force of character he compelled his compatriots to wonder a little and to think. This the majority of them resented; since it is—or was—the main object of the average Englishman to muddle through life with as little expenditure of brain power as possible.

As he passed now, Mrs. Pereira beside him, Damaris seated blissfully contemplative upon her lap, a huffle of comment arose not altogether amiable.

"Enter Persephone in the chariot of Hades!"

"Why not say the Rape of Proserpine at once?"

This between young Clatworthy, Assistant Deputy

Collector of Kankarpur, and his friend, Lathrop Evans, of the Calcutta Junior Bar; both late of Oxford and still haunted by memories of a classical education.

"Neat bit of driving, but dangerous," Mrs. Mackinder remarked under her breath. While her companion, Mrs. Gardiner, regardless of recent snubbings, embroidered the forbidden theme with lamentations over the disasters material as well as moral reserved to "poor motherless mites."

"What a love of a pink and mauve hat the Commissioner's lady friend is wearing," Mrs. Mountnessing murmured fatly to Nicholas Poltimore, her spouse. "I must try to remember and copy it. It would suit me to a T—wouldn't it now, hubby darling, that sweet love of a hat?"

"Damn showy, I call it," General Fulleylove spluttered.

He leaned back in the britzska, his right leg extended, his gouty foot reposing upon the cushion of the opposite seat.

"But, that's just what I have come to expect of Verity. Damn theatrical, I call it, always laying himself out like this for effect.—What am I going to do, Emily? Why, I'm going to get out of the carriage.—Dr. Meeking said I wasn't to walk? Dr. Meeking be hanged. As if, at my age, I was not best judge of what's likely to injure my own foot.—Heigh, Khusru, do you hear, you lazy devil? Let down the step.—Give me my stick, Emily, will you? Got it myself? Of course I haven't or I shouldn't ask you for it. You took it when we started. I remember giving it to you. It's on your side somewhere, buried among your preposterous petticoats. I wonder when you women'll have the common-sense to leave off clothing the lower half of your persons in captive balloons. Idiotic fashion!—Found my stick? Exactly. Didn't I tell you you'd taken it?—Where am I going? Why to have a look at Verity's little grass widow, of course. Where else should I go? Hear she's a deuced fetching little

piece ; and you know how long I've been shut up. Haven't set eyes on anything passable in female form for the best part of a month.—Your shoulder, Khusru—shoulder, I said, not hand, you clumsy fool.—It's hell when I attempt to stand, Emily, I tell you, blue hell. Don't touch me as you value your modesty. I might swear.—Did ever man suffer such ungodly torment !—Haven't I told you not to touch me, Emily ? I can't answer for my self-control. Oh ! Ah !—I'm down at last.—Peuh !—Confound this damn gout."

"Charming little family party," Mrs. Helder simpered to Captain Dewsbery, her husband's adjutant, as she sat by him on the box of the brake.

The gentleman receiving her remark in embarrassed and gloomy silence, she hastened to add :

"Not that I approve of that sort of thing. Joking apart, you know what I always tell you, Freddy. People can't be too careful. Besides advertising is such awfully bad form——"

And thereupon she very audibly screamed, her nerves from various causes being considerably on edge.

For Imogen Hobday, wheeling round her dog-cart, elected to give the sorely tried chestnut pony a couple of savage cuts across the loins. It reared, and backing into Captain Dewsbery's team tangled them up into a mad confusion of struggling grooms and plunging horses. Without apology, deaf to animated protest, Imogen cut at the pony again, rushing it headlong into the roadway where, passing Lugard and Hockless, she called recklessly over her shoulder :

"See you again in the dear by and by.—Ta-ta, poor pussies, I've had about enough of this."

But her sarcasm was lost on the two young men. For as the mail-phaeton, passing up between the ranks of waiting carriages, swept round to the right, James Hockless behaved very strangely. He swayed, nearly fell, putting his hands over his eyes with a sound something

between a sob and a yelp. And Lugard, concerned but very quiet, laid hold of him by the arm and led him away down the sandy slope.

"Steady, my son, steady," he said. "You needn't take the whole population of Bhutpur into your confidence, even though you are a bit hard hit. For everyone's sake try not to make an ass of yourself in public, dear old chap."

"My God!" Hockless gasped, still swaying. "But it was horrible. I made sure he'd drive clean over the edge of the cliff."

"You've got a go of fever, my son. That's what is the matter with you," Lugard sagely said. "You've ceased to be any sort of ornament to society, so come along. I think I'll tote you home, my Jimmy, and put you in your little bed."

V

INNOCENT of breathings of scandal and envious detraction, Damaris nestled in Mrs. Pereira's lap. The folds of that lady's soft white burnous were gathered lightly about her. From between them she looked up now and again at her father, sighing gently out of the fullness of a great content. For if no sorrows of later life surpass those of childhood in poignancy—blank walls of misery impossible to scale, black rooms of anguish door and windowless.—no joys of later life are so unqualified, careless of before and after, deliciously complete.

The little girl's heart was satisfied by the nearness of these two persons so beloved. Her pride was satisfied by feeling they belonged to her. By feeling, though at a different moral level, that the high-standing carriage, the motionless grooms, the handsome horses, upon whose shining backs and harness she looked down, belonged to her also. The ambition and masterfulness latent in her nature rejoiced, baby though she was, at the dignity and style of the whole turn-out. The poet and artist latent in her, groping their way towards active being, already avid of beauty and of mystery, rejoiced too, witnessing the miracle of sunset now transfiguring the vast panorama of land and sky.

Nor were lesser pleasures wanting. For the sight of so many people with whom she could claim acquaintance, sitting in their respective vehicles, or strolling to and fro, amused her greatly. Not that they mattered. That was

the divertin, part of it. They looked unreal, no more than toys out of a toy-box set up plaything fashion upon the pale flat floor of sun-blistered sand and earth. Throned on Henrietta's admirable lap, she contemplated them and their movements with a royal condescension none the less agreeable because unbecoming in one so young.

The proximity of the cliff-edge fascinated her, moreover, when, turning her head, she caught sight of river-bed and gleaming slow-journeying waters far below. Had not Henrietta's arm encircled her and had not the Commissioner Sahib himself held the reins, she might have felt tremulous at so close proximity to the abyss. But guarded by such grand, yet comfortable, company how should Fear dare wink an eyelid, much less uplift its grisly head?

At intervals Mrs. Pereira and her father spoke in the brief, often unfinished sentences of those who know one another too intimately to stand on ceremony or study effect. Her tone was delicately gay. His touched by a restrained and, as it seemed, reluctant tenderness, which affected Damaris, making her for the moment wistful as some half-heard strain of music might.

Then, while the sinking sun flung streaming banners of saffron and vermilion across the translucent chrysoprase of the western sky, a magnificence of imperial purple spread down over the land from the hard solid horizon line. The tremendous colour softened in the middle distance to powder-blue and violet, blotted here and there by the domed blackness of some village grove. Nearer thin lilac mists veiled the unsightly patchwork of small brown fields, off which the spring crops had lately been harvested.

Across the Maidan a string of camels paced—grotesque yet stately forms, outlined in living crimson—heading towards the crimson walls and archways of the city's southern gate. Their blue-grey shadows lay oblique upon the pallor of the sand, causing them to appear extravagantly tall, their legs extravagantly long and slender, fantastic

as fabulous beasts of legend or of dream. The temple upon the further river-bank caught the hot light too, blazing into angry rose against its backing of high trees. Above it innumerable kites and crows, crossing and recrossing in mid-air, wheeled in the intricate figures of their sunset dance.

And, as time went on, Damaris Verity, beholding all this from the vantage ground of Mrs. Pereira's lap, found her soul in process of growing altogether too big for her small body, so that her content gave place first to ecstasy and then to weariness. The demand upon her receptive faculty was too heavy, too continuous. She cuddled down, flapping Leghorn-hat and all, against Henrietta's bosom and encircling arm. A scent of sandal wood pervading the folds of the white burnous helped to lull her senses, so that she closed her eyes—shutting out the too great wonder of this most wonderful world—and slept.

But presently through the pleasant haze of sleep, men's voices reached her. She was conscious that one of the horses snorted and stamped, that her father moved his hands, shifting the reins, while he answered someone with a deliberate courtesy nearly akin to insolence. She was conscious, further, of a dislocation of her own comfort through the fact of Henrietta bending forward bowing, as she replied lightly to words of greeting and compliment.

"I think other people's very selfin," she protested drowsily, "coming 'sturving us with their talkings like this."

To which her father unexpectedly answered: "So do I, my wise child."

Whereupon, all of an instant, she grew singularly broad awake.

Charles Verity had undoubtedly displayed strategy in the selection of this rather hazardous standing ground, since the cliff-edge rendered approach to the carriage on the left—Mrs. Pereira's side—impracticable. Whoso desired

discourse with her must achieve it at a disconcerting angle across the interposed obstacle of his person. The hint might have seemed broad enough. Yet, when Damaris opened her eyes, they lighted not only upon the genial, punch-like figure of Colonel Waterhouse stationed close against the right front wheel of the mail-phaeton, but upon the less agreeable one of General Fulleylove also.

The latter supported himself by resting both hands on the crutch handle of his walking-stick ; one knee raised, the foot dangling like that of a dog carrying an injured paw. Peering upward he craned his short, thick neck so as to obtain fuller view of Mrs. Pereira above the promontory of Charles Verity's knees. His face was congested by the pain and effort of walking on a gouty foot ; but his prominent eyes were covetous and his purplish lips moved greedily under his bristling white moustache.

Damaris contemplated him with much solemnity for a few seconds. Then, wrinkling up her nose disdainfully, she confided to Henrietta in accents of inconvenient clearness :

" I likes Mrs. Fulleylove ever so much. She gave me a darling little bangle my last birthday ; only Nannie keeps it in a drawer 'cause she says bracelets is only for when you are grown up. But I don't like the General Sahib a bit. He tries to kiss me, and I think it's dreadful selfin of old men to want to make me kiss."

As a rule her father and Mrs. Pereira had charming manners and listened dutifully to all which she said. She therefore felt justly displeased and hurt when they began talking before she had finished speaking, rather loud and both at once. Colonel Waterhouse, too, for cause to her unknown, broke into a chuckling laugh. When grown-up people behave in odd rude ways you can't understand—they all, unfortunately, do so at times—it is best to ask no questions, but retire into yourself. So, with a dignified movement of head and shoulders, she turned her attention to the landscape again.

It had changed. The light was cooler, the colours less gorgeous, the sentiment of the whole pitched in a lower, less exciting key. To Damaris, it seemed that the world, during that short interval of sleep, had grown much older and rather sad.

Out of the grove behind the temple a trailing flight of flying foxes beat forth on leathery wings. They skimmed the surface of the river, each one in turn stooping its rusty muzzle to meet its own image in the gleaming water as it drank. Then, rising a little so as to clear the near bank, they filed away in somewhat evil procession to ravish gardens and orchards throughout the approaching night. Upon the lower terrace of the burning ghāt, figures moved to and fro, about a square stack of cross-laid wood. Among the wood rested something long and narrow, in shape suggestively human, closely swathed in white. A sound of chanting voices, an upleaping of pale, dancing flames along with spiral columns of blue smoke, which last, caught by a suck of air from off the slow-flowing river, drifted away as though in pursuit of the flapping, low-flying bats.

Damaris shivered and drew the folds of Mrs. Pereira's white burnous closer around her.

"I am cold, Commissioner Sahib. I want you to drive me and Henrietta back home to the Sultan-i-bagh," she said.

VI

MAURICE LUGARD counted a strenuous twenty-four hours after, to use his own phrase, "toting Jimmy home" from Chandra Devas Fort. That night fever ran high to the point of alarm, nor during the following day did it show signs of abatement. Between five and six o'clock he waylaid Colonel Verity in the vaulted passage, running the length of the bachelors' quarters, to make his report.

"Hockless is a bit quieter now, sir," he said. "But I should be awfully glad if you didn't mind not going in just at present. He's been clean off his head, poor chap, raving like Bedlam, and I'm afraid seeing anybody fresh may start him again."

"Is Dr. McCabe here?"

"No, he promised he'd come round about seven."

"Then we must chance it," Colonel Verity said. "I am dining with Mrs. Pereira at the Mackinders', and I must judge for myself how Hockless is before going. If necessary I shall cancel the engagement."

Seeing Lugard still hesitated, he added: "I shall be careful not to disturb him. It isn't my first experience of visiting the sick."

"Of course not, sir. And I'm sure I've no wish to put myself forward, still I am dead sure it would be best—safest all round, sir—that you should not see Jimmy just yet."

Charles Verity did not tolerate opposition. But the evident sincerity of the young man's appeal and the

earnestness of his manner produced their effect. The matter demanded investigation.

"Anything behind, Maurice?" he asked. "If so, I advise you to make a clean breast of it."

"That's just where the trouble comes in, sir. For if you will know, there's a lot of unsavouriness behind which ought to be spared you. And yet there's nothing behind whatsoever, because the whole affair is just so much rank lunacy and foolishness."

"Explicit," he said, though quite kindly, for he was fond of Lugard. "With your leave I will proceed to elucidate this little mystery myself."

Strained by anxiety and want of sleep, Maurice possibly overestimated the importance of the issues involved; but, as he saw it, his supreme duty consisted just now in keeping his official chief and his co-secretary apart. It was a ticklish piece of work, by no means to his taste. Yet his chivalry and charity were alike engaged. Neither through laziness nor fear of giving offence must he permit a meeting to take place, if it could be prevented.

Hockless he had heretofore regarded with an affection not unmingled with good-tempered malice. Wasn't he the typical prejudiced blundering Englishman, designed by an all-wise and excellently humorous Providence to afford sport and pastime to the more nimble-witted Celt? Only during the last four-and-twenty hours the said blundering Englishman had taken up new ground, thereby gaining surprisingly in dignity and in interest. Respectable old Jimmy, victim of a passion as genuine as it was hopeless and ill-judged; still more, Jimmy at grips—whether he knew it or not—with those dread Four Last Things, death, judgment, heaven and hell, assumed unexpected attributes of tragedy and of romance. A being, so localized by birth and education as Jimmy, so rudimentary in soul and unself-realized in character, about to make final exit from our comfortable, familiar earthly environment, struck Lugard indeed as an almost awe-inspiring object.

Towards Colonel Verity, on the other hand, his attitude had not suffered alteration. His first impressions of the inherent fineness of the man, of his gifts, both as a soldier and a ruler, of the force and magnetism of his personality had been fully confirmed by nearer acquaintance. Lugard's young enthusiasm, caught alight at the start, burned on with a steady flame of loyal admiration.

And now it happened that between these two, his companion and his leader, something obtruded itself which he reckoned unworthy to the point of baseness. The how and why, the probabilities and justifications of the matter, he did not stop to examine. It was sufficient that he scented dishonour; with which, both being gentlemen though of widely different calibre, it would be detestable that either should defile the other or defile himself.

"All the same, don't go into him now, sir. Pray don't. He's pretty bad; but there can't be any immediate danger. Dr. McCabe will be here within an hour," Lugard pleaded in reply to Colonel Verity's half-bantering speech. His eyes filled with tears and, though sorely ashamed of such exhibition of emotion, his voice shook. "Give the poor beggar a chance to recover his wits. You know, Commissioner, as I value my salvation, I'd give my life for you any hour of day or night——"

Touched, if somewhat annoyed, by the young man's vehement persistence, Charles Verity paused in his progress along the passage.

"I hope it may never come to that, Maurice, though I have great faith in you," he said.

"Then in proof of your faith do what I ask you, sir. Wait. For Hockless is as mad as a hatter, hag-ridden by a fixed idea, from which he can't escape."

"And pray what is this idea?"

"Ah! that's asking me to give away the whole show," Lugard answered, with engaging directness. "If I'm to tell you that, you may as well confess the unlucky wretch yourself. Then anyhow I should be quit of the unpleasant-

ness. But don't, sir," he pleaded, compunction seizing him. "For if you heard him raving, though you'd know—who better?—he wasn't responsible, it must colour your thought of him. Later, if he pulls round and comes to himself, you could not overlook the insult. Though we're on the same level, and very good chums, Jimmy and I, I know if it concerned myself I'd find it impossible to forget. I would need to put the length of a few continents between us if I was to keep my hands off him. And in your position it is a thousand times more unpardonable.—No, in mercy, sir, spare yourself hearing what must arouse your indignation—moonshine though it all is—and very justly arouse it."

"So I am the stumbling-block, am I, and rock of offence?"

"Yes, sir," Lugard said.

The interval of silence which followed taxed the young man's nerve considerably. Never before had his will been in direct conflict with that of his chief. Convinced of the rightness of his intention, however, he rallied to the struggle, praying inwardly that his pleading might prove effectual and that Colonel Verity, yielding to it, might finally relinquish his purpose. But to his distress, he found it impossible to concentrate his whole attention upon the one matter. His thought began to wander, his determination to slacken, drawn aside by an alien influence.

For, in that silent interval, uneasy conviction grew upon Lugard that he was not alone with Colonel Verity. A third person, or rather a third intelligence, had become an active, though unseen and unheard, participant in their interview. His common-sense rejected the idea. Very heartily he wrote himself down an ass; yet failed to shake off the conviction. During a few memorable seconds, indeed, he even localized the intruder. Subtile, impalpable as a column of air it swept in—he could have sworn it did—between himself and Colonel Verity, and remained stationary, while his mind penetrated its disposition, knowing it

for an intelligence at once sexless and licentious, a pander to blind infructuous impulses and unholy desires. Lugard recoiled from its neighbourhood in moral disgust. Whereupon he felt it sweep onward, drifting down the lofty, windowless passage until the door of Hockless' bedroom was reached. There he knew it must have halted, because the gaudy-patterned cotton cloth curtain, masking the doorway, lifted along the hem and quivered as though stirred by a sudden draught.

And about this motion of the curtain there was to Lugard something so inexpressibly agitating and unpleasant that he could not quite control himself.

"Good heavens, sir!" he exclaimed. "Did you see that?"

But, before the Commissioner had time to reply, sounds became audible in Hockless' sick chamber. At first inarticulate, whimperings of mere animal complaint, wholly piteous, clearing presently to an outcry of harsh, continuous speech.

Hearing it, Colonel Verity went forward along the passage. Opposite the curtain he, too, halted and stood listening, his head a little bent, his expression keen yet reserved, one hand travelling down slowly over his flowing moustache.

"Who is with him now?" he asked curtly.

"Old Buddhu, sir, and"—after a moment's hesitation—"Mrs. Watson was there too when I left."

Colonel Verity raised his head and looked round at Lugard, who stood a little behind him.

"Terrible as an army with banners," the young man quoted to himself, involuntarily. He saw that, for some reason, he had drawn the lightning. In rather less than no time it would strike. Yet, when Colonel Verity spoke, the words came calmly enough.

"Pray may I ask, are you responsible for Mrs. Watson's attendance here?" he said.

"No, sir," Lugard answered, with a movement of pride

and of relief. "I am not responsible. I neither sent for Mrs. Watson, nor did I want her. I very much prefer nursing Jimmy myself, with Buddhu's help. This isn't a woman's job, in my opinion. Only Jimmy quieted down and was so much less restless from the time Mrs. Watson came into the room that I hardly liked to send her away. You see, sir——"

He broke off, for from within the room Hockless shouted hoarsely :

"Stop him, stop him, I say ! You fools, don't you see what he is at ? Lay hold of the horses' heads. It's murder, I tell you, cold-blooded murder. Leave go, Lugard, leave go of me, you treacherous brute.—I've got to save her, to save her—Ah ! ah !—It's too late ! They're over. Oh ! my God, the cliff, the cliff ! "

VII

AS Colonel Verity entered the darkened room, old Buddhu got up from his squatting position upon the floor. Bringing his palms together, after the manner of one about to dive, he salaamed, bending his body from the loins, until his turbaned head was on a level with his knees. Recovering, he backed away to the wall, and stood there immobile.

Hockless, exhausted by his paroxysm of delirious speech, lay flat on his back, his face and neck a dark, earthy red against the tumbled pillows. His eyes, sunken in their sockets, stared upward, the bloodshot white of the eyeballs showing all round the iris. His mouth gaped open, the lips purplish and cracked by fever. Unshaven, his hair upstanding in stiff, uneven yellow-red stubble, he presented anything but an impressive or heroic appearance. To associate him with desperate accusations, desperate emotions, demanded a considerable exercise of imagination.

In deference to Colonel Verity's advent, Sarah Watson rose from her chair at the bedside, her spare, angular figure almost uncomfortably indefinite in the low light. She moved noiselessly, with utmost caution, yet Hockless rolled over on his side, clutching with both hands at her straight grey skirts and neat black silk apron.

"Don't go, mother," he implored. "Not till I've finished telling you. I'm half ashamed to speak of such vile things; but I can't get at any of her people, and warn

them, out here in this horrible India—so I am forced to ask you. Don't say no—Mummy darling. Don't be angry with me. But go and call on her father-in-law, old Mr. Pereira. See him in Tullingworth to-day—to-day, you understand.—You'll go, won't you? Oh! I know it's a beastly job to put on you. I hate to ask you; but everything's at stake for—for her, mother.—And you'll tell him his son, Captain Pereira, must come at once, directly, you understand, and take her back to Delhi—get her clean away from this wicked house and these wicked people. Tell him there isn't an hour to lose, or something shameful will happen. Tell him to hurry—hurry. And tell him she's as pure as the day. For heaven's sake don't let him think any evil of her, mother. She hasn't the remotest conception of the hideous danger she's running. She's completely taken in by Verity. He's a devil incarnate——”

Sarah Watson stooped down over the bed, trying, almost roughly, to put her hand upon Hockless' mouth and so, by force, silence him. But he fought it aside with unexpected strength.

“No, no,” he cried, his voice again rising to a shout. “You shan't, you mustn't stop me.—You must listen. It isn't like you to refuse help and shirk responsibility. Think, think if she was your own child, one of my sisters, wouldn't you do any mortal thing to save her from dishonour? Of course you would.—You know you would, Mummy.”

He laid hold of her hand. Fondled it gently, his poor fever-seamed face touchingly childlike, his cracked lips bleeding in the effort to smile.

“Ah! if you knew how thankful I am to see you,” he said. “I've been so awfully miserable and lonely—guessing the devilry which was going on here and unable to prevent it. You see they're all in league against me because I'm straight. For I am straight, mother. I couldn't believe it of them at first—I trusted them—specially Lugard. He pretended to be my friend. I cared for

him awfully. But he's just as bad as the rest. He'd sell his soul to please Verity. He's in the plot. So's McCabe, and Mrs. Watson, little Damaris' nurse. I always thought her a good woman. She might have shown some pity.—Don't go, mother, don't go. It comforts me to see you, and everything, everybody, has been so hateful.—They locked me in here, and got McCabe to drug me. I know they had me drugged to keep me out of the way till Verity'd done what he wanted with Mrs. Pereira."

The young man's voice sank to a terrified whisper.

"And he's cruel, mother, hideously cruel. He's drunk with power. At the club the other evening, Clatworthy let out what happened when Verity was first appointed Commissioner. His punishments were frightful. He hung men in batches, had them shot, blown from the guns. It was kept dark, Clatworthy says, for political reasons; but he had it from natives at Kankarpur. He's in their confidence. And—and she's so lovely. I don't mean any harm. Before God, I'm not thinking of myself. All I want, all I pray for, is somehow to save her—that—that her husband may come and fetch her, even though I never see her again—and take her clean out of all this accursedness before—before——"

Hockless flung himself over upon his face, jamming his forehead down on his folded arms.

"I love her," he panted, "I love her. I can't help myself. I never dreamt what love meant till now. It's naked heaven and hell whipped together. I love her. And I am nothing to her. Less than nothing. I don't ask to be anything—only let Pereira, whom she belongs to, take her away soon or I shall have to die or to—to kill——"

His utterance became inarticulate, a dull animal moaning which died down, smothered among the pillows, while his shoulders heaved, convulsed by the dry sobs which tore his throat. At last, the fury of his madness spent, he

rolled over on his back again, his eyes closed, his mouth gaping, and lay as one dead.

To Maurice Lugard the episode had been in every respect detestable. It was to save his chief from some such unseemly spectacle that he had exercised all his powers of persuasion. But the reality surpassed his worst fears and left him literally gasping. Moreover, though he knew Hockless' statements to be a tissue of falsehoods and exaggerations, there was an effect of coherence, let alone of sincerity, about them not a little bewildering. He found it far from easy to keep his head, accept the reasonable pathological explanation, and write the words fever, delirium, with convincing finality across his own emotion and thought.

It followed that, being not only scandalized and disgusted, but put somewhat off his balance thus, a quite appreciable time elapsed before he summoned up courage to look at Colonel Verity and ascertain to what degree this rather lurid denunciation affected him.

He had advanced and, his hands clasped behind him, stood on the right of the bed gazing down at its now inert and pitiful occupant. Many men, even when wholly innocent, shrink and cower under the lash of calumny. Not so Charles Verity. Save for the hard light in his eyes and extreme pallor of his skin, he appeared to Lugard unmoved. So that—as the young man told himself, not without a movement of admiration—if he indeed suffered the diabolic possession with which poor lunatic Jimmy accredited him, it could be by no less a personage than Lucifer, Son of the Morning, himself, his pride of bearing was so royally intact.

Presently, raising his head slightly, Colonel Verity addressed Sarah Watson, who, grey and shadowlike, faced him on the opposite side of the bed.

"You have exceeded your duty," he told her. "Your place is not here. Return, if you please, to your own department. You have plenty to occupy you there, in

attending to the welfare of my daughter and to the comfort of Mrs. Pereira, my guest."

Lugard, watching, saw the woman recoil, swaying as under the force of physical violence ; and, after a moment, steady herself again resolutely. The effect upon his mind was acutely painful.

"Pray understand I do not expect you to enter this room again upon any pretence whatever," Colonel Verity continued. "You have my orders. They are explicit. I require them to be obeyed."

Having thus disposed of Mrs. Watson, he turned to Lugard, while his face softened somewhat.

"I find I must ask you to take my place at the Mac-kindens' dinner to-night. Make my excuses both to Mrs. Pereira and to them. Do not enter into explanations in either case. Merely say that I am extremely sorry that I am unavoidably detained."

"But upon my word, sir—I really don't know how I——" the young man protested, shaken out of habitual deference by this astonishing transition from height of drama to commonplaces of social intercourse.

Colonel Verity looked kindly at him.

"Had I asked some great thing of you, Maurice, you would have hastened to accomplish it. Do this small thing, then, since no great one is demanded of you. You tried to spare me. Perhaps I should have been wiser had I followed your advice. I judged otherwise. Now I must see the matter through. Therefore go or you will keep Mrs. Pereira waiting. As it is you have barely time to dress. And look here, when you come in get straight to bed. You are relieved of all further responsibility for to-night."

As he reached the door Lugard felt impelled to look back.

Overcome by sleep, old Buddhu had sunk into a squatting position upon the floor again. Hockless lay nerveless, motionless, along the centre of the bed. Beside it Colonel Verity leaned back in a chair, his legs crossed, his chin

sunk on his breast, one hand travelling down slowly over his drooping moustache

Suddenly he started, sat bolt upright and glanced sharply over his shoulder into the dusky corner of the room behind him, as though about to challenge some intruder. And, as he did so, Lugard became aware once more of a presence over and above those three human and tangible ones—the presence, unseen yet undeniable, of an intelligence at once sexless and licentious, pander to blind infructuous impulses and unholy desires. He knew that it stayed at Colonel Verity's elbow, interposing itself between the latter and the sick man upon the bed. And this knowledge begot in him apprehension of dangers far reaching and intimate—dangers outpacing social or physical issues, trenching upon spiritual issues of rather terrible moment. His very soul was frightened, as he closed the door behind him, and, pushing the cotton cloth curtain aside, passed out into the cooler atmosphere of the high vaulted passage.

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BOOK IV

THE LAND OF REGRETS



I

FOR reasons which will presently appear it seemed good to Mrs. Pereira, on the morning following the Mackinders' dinner-party, to write her letters downstairs rather than in her own room.

Ink-pot and neat blue leather writing-case upon a table beside her, blotting-book and note-paper spread upon her knee, she established herself outside the drawing-room in a position commanding the whole length of the western verandah. Within the horseshoe-headed archways the cane blinds were drawn down to the floor level, tempering the light. A gentle northerly breeze, sighing through the tufted branches of the casuarina trees bordering the carriage drive, added to the prevailing sense of agreeable coolness. Ail ministered, in short, to concentration, to that ruminative calm in which correspondence thrives. But Mrs. Pereira was not in her happiest mood; she felt perplexed, a little resentful, and not a little curious. For things, so she fancied at least, were happening at the Sultan-i-bagh—had been happening there ever since her drive, two evenings ago, with Colonel Verity and Damaris to Chandra Devas Fort. She had a suspicion they were unpleasant things, of which it was intended she should remain ignorant. The intention was well-meant, no doubt, but she did not like it. It worried her. She felt restless upstairs. Here she was more in touch, more on the spot. Still her letter-writing suffered.

Fifty years ago that pleasant art still flourished

telephones being as yet happily non-existent and telegrams reserved to moments of emotional desperation. Mrs. Pereira practised it with satisfaction to herself and entertainment to others. She "wrote a remarkably good letter," as the phrase went. As a rule her pen travelled easily in a graceful, flowing hand, the lines evenly spaced, the characters pointed, sloping from left to right, legible, elegant and sprightly in effect, true index to her own nature. This morning she proposed writing one of those bright gossip letters which pacify, without conspicuously enlightening, their recipient. But, notwithstanding her fluency and skill, the task proved far from easy, since indirectly raising questions which, in her present humour, she found it peculiarly irritating to discuss. It followed that her pen stayed idle for minutes together while she meditated, her lips thin, fine lines traversing her forehead, gazing down the long vista of the verandah—broken half-way by a glare of white light pouring in under the portico—or letting her eyes dwell upon the dignified yet energetic figure of little Damaris Verity, here, at her feet.

Seated upon a praying carpet—the fiery scarlets, blues and crimsons of it faded by age to a sea-shell tenderness of tone—Damaris told an apparently interminable story to a very miscellaneous assembly of dolls. These, large and small, wax, china, wooden, papier-mâché, down to an amorphous rag-baby of peculiar repulsiveness, were disposed in a semicircle before her, their backs propped up against stools, the legs of tables and chairs. Tulsi, the little ayah, meantime, crouched upon the ground close at hand, ready to fetch and carry should occasion demand.

To Mrs. Pereira the child's likeness to Colonel Verity was almost uncanny as, with descriptive gestures and an expression at once exalted and absorbed, she addressed her permanently simpering audience. The history she recounted, though mainly in high heroic vein, judging by the chanting tones of her voice, must have contained merry episodes—as well, for, now and again, she bowed

her slender body double, laughing with deliciously infectious conviction of the super-excellence of her own joke.

Whereupon Mrs. Pereira's lips relaxed into a faint smile; to harden speedily into an even thinner line than before, as she re-applied herself resolutely to her letter-writing.

For she recognized—and this suggested both a way of escape from, and aggravation of, her present perplexities—that the time had arrived for her to name the date of her return to husband, home and duty. Yesterday hints and insinuations had reached her, bearing on the point, at remembrance of which she smarted even yet. Formerly she would have laughed such hints and insinuations to scorn as preposterously vulgar and silly. But although rooted in misconception, false—thank heaven—in substance and in fact, she could no longer call them preposterous.

It had come about thus. The Mackinders' dinner-party proved a disappointment, and worse in some respects than a disappointment, throughout. Maurice Lugard was an unusually attractive young fellow. Under ordinary circumstances she would by no means have disdained his society; but as a substitute for Colonel Verity and all the way of prestige and position Colonel Verity stood for, he didn't do one bit. And then was there not something mysterious, displeasing even, alike in the message of apology he brought her and in his own demeanour? Henrietta, it may be noted in passing, detested mystery. She did not deny Lugard's manner was correct, and that he paid her all due attention; but he struck her as unbecomingly silent and preoccupied, by no means so grateful as a youth of his age and modest standing should be for the privilege of acting as her escort.

It followed that her entry into Mrs. Mackinder's drawing-room, far from being the triumph she had pictured, proved a but awkward affair, although she met it, outwardly at all events, with graceful composure in her most pensive evening gown.

To begin with, she and her young cavalier were decidedly late. More than half Bhutpur, officially speaking, had been invited, and, with manifest alacrity, more than half Bhutpur had accepted, arrived punctually and been kept waiting. It had looked, not without an undercurrent of malice, to behold the heretofore socially impeccable Commissioner following at Mrs. Pereira's fashionable heels. Not so beholding him, it made round eyes and fell into inquiring silence. Lugard's brief explanation was in point of fact no explanation at all, and Mrs. Pereira herself clearly had nothing to add to it. Whereupon more than half Bhutpur broke forth into a buzz of purely perfunctory conversation, a note of interrogation in its still round eyes.

None of this was lost upon Henrietta. And she suffered active annoyance, although Mrs. Mackinder, with the instinct of a kindly woman and practised hostess, hastened to smooth over the contretemps.

"I am so sorry—of course, we are all sorry," she said civilly. "But it cannot be helped. The Commissioner is the most punctilious of men. He would never willingly break an engagement."

Which last was a lie, and she knew it. But Bhutpur was behaving cattily and, even at the sacrifice of truth, discipline must be maintained—Bhutpur must be kept in order. Then, nodding to Lugard, she added:

"And so, Maurice, as I quite refuse to rearrange my table at the eleventh hour, you must just continue to fill your chief's shoes and take me in to dinner. After all, you are cut out for early promotion, if half I hear of you is true, so at most I forestall your distinctions by a few years."

As guest of the evening Henrietta sat beside her host, the District Judge—a distinguished, courtly-mannered gentleman, blessed with a neat wit and slow, reflective smile. Clearly it was her duty, despite inward vexation, to pay for her entertainment in sparkling talk, to divert

and to charm. Rallying her spirits, she proceeded to fulfil the said duty with conspicuous success. Mr. Mackinder manifested his enjoyment of her society in scrupulously discreet and respectful fashion. Not so Colonel Waterhouse, who occupied the chair on her left. As course followed course, his bearing, in Henrietta's opinion, became a thought too familiar, his compliments too personal, his anecdotes too broad, his glances and chuckling laughter too frequent and intimate. It incensed her to have this punch-like old fellow leaning sideways and peeping down inside the bodice of her evening dress, while Mrs. Hermon Helder glared at her round the curve of his bulging back. Still to notice impertinence is merely, in the majority of cases, to invite its continuance. Henrietta controlled her tongue and temper, though she grew increasingly uncomfortable. The more so that an odious suspicion occurred to her it is thus even fairly well-bred and clean-living men feel themselves at liberty to behave to a pretty woman whose position they consider slightly equivocal.

Nor did mischance end here. In the drawing-room after dinner the ladies ranged themselves in opposing camps. The smaller and more select contingent supported their hostess, who, in her grandest Baillie of Blairgovan manner, was at great pains to make herself agreeable to Henrietta. The larger and, it may be added, noisier, grouped itself about Mrs. Hermon Helder, who—undeterred by a reputation for friendships with members of the opposite sex more lucrative than platonic—ignored Henrietta's existence ostentatiously from the opposite side of the room. Mrs. Gardiner, wife of the Government chaplain, meanwhile, animated by that zeal of—so-called—peacemaking which rarely fails to fan smouldering fires of animosity into flame, meandered back and forth across the neutral zone dividing the belligerents, trailing provocation in her wake.

"Surely there are chairs in plenty," Mrs. Mackinder

exclaimed at last, stirred into open protest by these perambulations. "Pray take whichever you like and sit down comfortably, Mrs. Gardiner. If you are afraid of draughts I can recommend the settee in the corner. You are perfectly safe from open doors and windows there."

"Truly I have no fear of draughts," the other replied in tones of silky sweetness. "In a small house like ours we are necessarily inured to such minor discomforts. I am waiting to speak a few words to Mrs. Helder. But she is so surrounded, as you see. I must watch my opportunity. Please do not think of me—it is so very kind of you—but later I will find myself a seat."

With the advent of the gentlemen from the dining-room more active signs of hostility ceased. Yet, to Henrietta's thinking, the atmosphere remained somewhat surcharged. She gladly, therefore, embraced the earliest opportunity of asking for the carriage, and, in Lugard's discouraging company, drove homeward to the Sultan-i-bagh through the starlit splendour of the Indian night.

She had counted on seeing Colonel Verity upon her return, if only for a minute; counted on his offering some little personal apology for his desertion of her. But here again she suffered disappointment. Only scarlet and gold-coated servants awaited her upon the steps and under the portico. Their master gave no sign; and she passed indoors sensible, for once, not only of neglect but of most unwonted nervousness. For obstinately sceptical though she might be, both by nature and by will, concerning the supernatural, she was aware now, as on that first night of her visit, of an indefinable oppression and menace pervading the house. The great circular hall, poorly lighted below and towering into cavernous darkness overhead, seemed to be pervaded by busy whisperings and did unquestionably echo the lightest footfall, even the rustlings of her own silk dinner-gown. The place was noisy with its own large silence, so she felt.

Lugard went with her to the bottom of the staircase,

where she bade him a frigid good-night. The young man should have exerted himself more to be agreeable. She wished to intimate, delicately of course, he was in disgrace. Then, preceded by Aloysius, her elderly Goanese boy—brother of Josepha Maria, and relic of the Chauncey Adams dispensation—carrying a lamp, she made her way, in a decidedly chastened and anxious spirit, up the steep, glistening marble flight.

Nor had the night's rest, Josepha Maria sleeping, as insulator, upon the couch at the foot of her bed, served to dissipate her unpleasant impressions. She awoke with a weight on her mind, a weight of perplexity. For that breath, real or imagined, of disrespect and neglect tarnished the brightness of her self-complacency. To discredit a light, skilful, concrete nature to itself, thus depriving it of the completeness of its self-esteem, is, in some degree, to deprive it of its motive power also. Failing faith in itself, it has no higher, nobler faith to fall back on. Hence pitiable confusion, angry uncertainty.

Did ever wife sit down at more exasperating disadvantage to write a bright, gossipy and unilluminating letter to an absent husband?

Yet, on the face of it, the offensive and agitating experiences of yesterday told in favour of a return to the said husband, and all he represented of immunity from invidious comment, with all possible celerity. Never unfortunately, however, had domesticity appeared less enticing! Never had Henrietta felt greater disinclination to seek the arms of her rather flabby and flashy, though honestly adoring, spouse! To her, just now, the shelter of those arms implied a distinct declension, social and intellectual. She came within an ace of adding *moral* as well; but there had the good sense, let alone sense of humour, to check herself. For, rightly considered, were not the moral aspects of the situation possibly exactly that which made this letter to Johnny Pereira so odiously difficult to write? She knew they were; and again her

glance dwelt almost resentfully upon the small feminine replica of Colonel Verity sitting at her feet.

"And so they 'cided to go away," Damaris chanted, exultant, her head thrown back, her arms outstretched, her whole being vibrant with the ecstasy of improvisation. "And they rode upon most e-nor-mious camels. And The Others ran after them very quick, calling and screaming with calling. But they wouldn't 'tend, because you see The Others was dreff'ly selfin' sometimes and fussed in and spoiled their beautiful thinkings. So they 'greed not to 'tend at all; but rode away and away quite 'tented, all by themselves, for ever so many weeks and days, till they came to the shiny place which the sun slides down where the edge of the world rubs the sky."

Then, the tides of inspiration ebbing, she drooped and shook her small shoulders fretfully.

"And that's quite all," she said. "I'm tired. I don't want to tell you no more stories—I'm going to make some other play now."

She got up, stretched languidly, and stood balancing on one foot, her head inclined sideways, her forefinger pressed against the round of her cheek, watching Mrs. Pereira with eyes of fond desire.

"I suppose I didn't ought to 'sturve Henrietta in her writings," she remarked tentatively; adding, after a silent interval, raising her voice a little: "No, I'm sure I oughtn't to 'sturve her, so I'll just go into the south verandah, quite good, till she's done her writings. Only"—with a deep sigh—"I do hope Henrietta won't take too dreadful long 'cause Nannie's sure to fetch me in a little tiny while now, I think, to do my reading lessons."

Another silent interval. Whether by accident or by design Mrs. Pereira failed to perceive when the direct address to the dolls gave place to an indirect address to herself. She made no response; but bent over her blotting book—bent so low that the tip of the long smooth curl, depending from behind her left ear, now and again touched the

surface of her notepaper. At this Damaris gazed, fascinated, for a sensible length of time. Then, turning resolutely away, she sauntered through cool shaded space. As she went she sang a little wandering wordless song to herself, while Tulsi arose, with a tinkle of glass and silver bangles, and followed her.

"I'm quite good. I said I'd go and I'm going. But I do think Henrietta might have given up her writings just to look at me," Damaris told herself, and the notes of her wordless song had a quavering in them altogether pathetic.

II

HENRIETTA finished her letter at last. Addressed it, stuck down the flap of the envelope, and sat thinking, the lines of her chiselled face rigid, her fine white hands clasped upon the open blotting book, while the breeze, drawing in under the portico, gently fluttered the outstanding folds and flounces of her lilac and white muslin gown.

Her letter was written ; but her mind still focussed upon its recipient, Johnny Pereira. Very seldom did he occupy the centre of the stage, and she felt angry with him for so doing. Angry with herself, too, for condescending to feel thus angry. Angry, above all, with the turn of events which, subjectively at all events, put him in the right, she herself in the wrong, for once. It constituted an inversion of his and her proper relation, as she understood that relation. Few things, it must be granted, are more irritating than infringement of one's own superiority by an acknowledged inferior. That John Pereira should be in her debt, material or moral, made for self-complacency ; but that she should, by even so little, be in his debt constituted an offence—on his part—well nigh intolerable.

In this light she now reviewed the past, with the result all she had ever done or left undone, in respect of the poor man, rose up in judgment against him. That this was absurdly unfair, flagrantly unjust, mattered not a fig in her present humour. Perplexed, self-distrustful,

disappointed, she was out to find a victim. What more natural, under the circumstances, than that she should select so familiar a piece of private property as her own husband?

Pereira and his devotion had presented themselves shortly after Chauncey Adams' death, when her future appeared very much at loose ends. The young man's parents, a retired Anglo-Indian Colonel and his wife, had shown her not only honest kindness, but a quite flattering degree of attention, during the weary months of the elderly merchant-banker's illness at Tullingworth. Their precious only son, invalided home, arrived, his wounds still green, all the glamour of the Mutiny surrounding him. He showed to advantage just then; his frivolity sobered by the pressure of tremendous events, his rather exuberant physique reduced by hardship and considerable blood-letting.

To Henrietta, England—which she had left as school-girl—meant little beyond grey skies, lessons, absence of amusement; and, latterly, perpetual anxiety, ending in stiff scratchy white caps, covering up her pretty hair, and unbecoming crape-loaded dresses. The prospect of settling down in an inland watering-place, like Tullingworth, with few acquaintances and a bare thousand a year, by no means smiled on her. She thought of the round of gaieties, dinners, picnics, dances; of rides with gallant cavaliers while the day was still young in the fine upland air of the Dekhan; thought of one spacious, hospitable house at Poonah, another on Malabar Hill, Bombay; of the retinue of servants and many horses to which she had been accustomed. Out there she had queened it; been fêted, petted, had counted for very much, thanks to her husband's wealth and her own charming personality. Here, in England, as she candidly admitted, she counted for next to nothing. She refused to set herself to worm and wriggle her way into county or London society. Whatever her faults, having kept

open house, lived largely, brilliantly, she could not demean herself to scheme for recognition, solicit patronage, toadying the local little-great.

And so it came about that she began seriously to contemplate utilizing Johnny Pereira and his rather abject admiration. Cold-blooded women are the readiest to marry again. They feel no intimate shames or scruples in the matter, the glory and terror of passion having passed them by. Henrietta reviewed the position calmly, weighing the pros and cons of marriage with Johnny Pereira. She wanted to go to India. Here was the means, the sufficient reason, ready to her hand. True the big houses and big fortune were things of the past; but against this she set the fact that in the India of those days it was far smarter, far more distinguished, to be the wife of a cavalry officer than of business man, however wealthy the latter might be. Charles Verity had married. This made a difference—perhaps. She turned away her head. For upon the subject of Charles Verity she very wisely decided not to dwell. His friendship and the interest he had excited in her were, after all, but one pleasant episode among many. Still she would be glad to see him again. Well, was not that an added reason for going?

Therefore she would return to the painted eastern land, land of fierce gods and fiercer sunshine, of vast plains, mighty rivers, teeming cities; go back to the lazy, luxurious manner of life and the restricted society in which she felt at home. Rebellion had been crushed and English prestige stood higher than ever—she need have no fears. And she would be very nice to John Knatchbull Pereira. Was not that in the bond? He might not be notably well-bred, interesting or clever; but, as matters stood, he fulfilled her requirements. She was not off her head about him. But then about who, or about what, had she ever been off her head? She thanked her good sense, and heaven, nothing and nobody.—So it was

settled. With a little managing, a little adroit repressing and schooling, John Pereira would do.

And, for the first three out of the five years of their marriage, Pereira had done quite passably well. Later deterioration, the inherent weakness of his character in respect of gambling and liquor, set in. Henrietta did not disturb herself greatly. If he would be silly and tiresome, silly and tiresome he would be. But she expected him to keep within decent limits. How many men gambled, how many men drank—more or less! And he was irreproachable about women, as far as she knew. Infidelity would have displeased her excessively—chiefly as being an indirect reflection upon her own charms. But Pereira continued to adore. So that now, thinking of the advisability of bringing her visit to a close and returning home, she shook her pretty shoulders and made a little grimace. He would be so terribly affectionate and——

Here the ring of footsteps broke up her meditation. Colonel Verity and Dr. McCabe came out into the portico and stood there talking.

In appearance the two men offered a notable contrast. The doctor was below the middle height, bullet-headed and heavy-shouldered, his hands and feet disproportionately large. His neck, and what of face was discoverable, showed brick red amongst a thick growth of roughly cropped hair, sandy moustache, eyebrow, and whisker growing high on the cheek. The nose insignificant, upper lip long, jaws outstanding. The small blue-grey eyes at once merry, faithful and cunning. McCabe loved a pretty woman much, but honestly; a good horse more, not always quite honestly; and a fight best of all, whatever its cause or effect.

Dress could not be counted among the doctor's strong points. This morning his flannel trousers, strained round the calf and bulbous at the knee, were undeniably grubby. His short, grey alpaca coat, buttoned up to the

neck, advertised rather than concealed an absence of waistcoat and collar. His appearance, in truth, was by no means distinguished. Colonel Verity towered above him, lofty in bearing as in stature, cutting into his fluent, continuous speech, from time to time, with brief trenchantly delivered questions.

Henrietta maintained the same attitude, her hands clasped upon her open blotting book, though it cost her an effort to do so. For a queer internal spasm passed through her at sight of Charles Verity. Mother-of-pearl pink tinted her cheeks and her pulse quickened. Of such involuntary physical disturbance she disapproved from every point of view. It was weak, school-girly. Nor did she approve her acute consciousness of every detail of the little scene the two men enacted.

She had hedged in her letter to her husband, declaring—after all—the date of her home-coming uncertain, owing to engagements which it would have been rude to refuse and would be equally rude to cancel.—“As a guest she was, of course, dependent upon the convenience of others, unable to do just what she liked. She would write again in a day or two. Meanwhile she *did* feel much the better for the change, though she must confess Bhutpur did not strike her as super-abundantly lively. Every one tried to be civil and nice, and the Sultan-i-bagh gardens were wonderful, though rather neglected. She had plenty of time to herself, which *suit*ed her exactly”—and so forth and so on, a judicious admixture of half-truths and reservations neatly adapted to the exigencies of the situation.

Annoyance at the difficulties of its composition notwithstanding, Henrietta had felt well pleased at this clever adjustment of means to an end. But at sight of Charles Verity, along with flushing cheeks, beating heart, and queer little inward spasm, her mental atmosphere changed. Her cleverly evasive letter dwindled to a petty and ignoble performance of which she had scanty

reason to feel proud, while self-distrust, distrust of her present position deepened. Sharply she asked herself whether she should not tear up her letter and, here and now, write in a quite different strain? Fix the date, and that an immediate one, of her return, thus at once safeguarding her endangered superiority and giving the lie to impertinent and malicious tongues. To do so would restore her self-esteem, would be politic, would, in plain English, be honest and right. Only—only—the cost of such laudable action——

During the last ten days her intercourse with her host had been, in her opinion, ideal because superficial, that of two extremely good friends whose mutual regard does not seek further development. Hence she had talked, listened, sympathized and advised in growing security and content. Pretty turns of coquetry lent point to that intercourse, but never once had she crossed the danger line. While if, now and again, tenderness coloured Colonel Verity's manner or speech, it was of a gently ironic rather than amatory sort. The relation as it stood, or appeared to stand, justified Henrietta's natural optimism, while gratifying her ambition and satisfying her good taste. For what more fascinating occupation than to play the part of Egeria, thus, to a famous man, with nothing to pay for your triumph and treat! How could she consent to give it all up?

She looked at Charles Verity, thought of John Pereira, and felt acutely unhappy and injured. To re-write her letter in that other sense, was to sign the death warrant of the most exhilarating experience of her life.

An explosion of genial farewells from McCabe, as he ran sideways, crab-fashion, down the wide steps to the dusty, ramshackle green-slatted gharry waiting below; while clad in white jacket, breeches, and riding boots, Colonel Verity stood absently watching the departure of his garrulous visitor.

His tall figure and those of the two attendant chuprassies

—lithe, sinewy fellows wearing long scarlet coats, plentifully gold-laced—even the columns and polished pavement of the stately portico, took on a strangely ethereal effect in the fine tenuous shadow, as against a blare of sunshine raking the carriage-drive, and the parched, blistered waste land beyond seen between the trunks of the tamarind trees in the avenue.

The picture thus presented impressed Mrs. Pereira almost painfully, with the force of an actual revelation, which begot in her singular insight, along with most unaccustomed dread of possible loss. For not only were the power and strength of Charles Verity evident to her just then; but the spiritual quality in him was evident likewise. This worked harshly upon her, making him at once more to be desired and more inaccessible. She had never understood him so well, nor, it may be added, understood the limitations of her own nature, intelligence, opportunity so well either. If rumour spoke truly he had ugly moments, was despotic, relentless. He might be so, might even very roundly sin. Yet thereby she found his attraction in no degree impaired—the commanding, agitating attraction of one in whom conscience never wholly dies, who is never wholly enslaved by things of time and sense; but who gazes, consciously and undismayed, upon the abiding mystery of man's life and destiny, and upon the still deeper, more unfathomable mystery of that which man calls God.

To apprehend these things was as the taking of a far journey to the small, skilful, concrete soul of Henrietta Pereira. It produced a revulsion of feeling, making her tired, so that the pretty roses faded in her cheeks, leaving her face wan, her features drawn, her thirty-three years unkindly apparent. While, as a result of that same tiredness, the prospect of her husband's society became almost welcome in its absence of imaginative and intellectual demand, its comfortable assurance of stable mediocrity.

She made a final return upon herself, determining to affront no more adventures. That such determination amounted to an admission of failure was eminently disagreeable; but the truth pressed in on her. She was out of place, out of her depth here at Bhutpur. Had not the affair of last night—Colonel Verity's apparent neglect, Lugard's aloftness, Colonel Waterhouse's familiarity, the impertinence of Mrs. Hermon Helder and her following, let alone her own perception of malign influences abroad in the great house itself, proved that up to the hilt? She must find her footing again, wade ashore, so to say; and go home, regardless of Johnny's all too active affections. Those last must be tolerated for the sake of safety.

So, to clinch matters, she decided, now and here, to destroy her evasive hedging letter and write another frankly fixing the date of her return.

III

BUT accident intervened. Or was it not rather the *genius loci*, the spirit of the Sultan-i-bagh—an intelligence at once sexless and licentious, pander to blind, infructuous impulses and unholy desires—who, finding its opportunity, plucked both man and woman by the sleeve?

For, just as Henrietta was about to carry her praiseworthy resolution into effect, the doctor's gharry rattled out into the merciless sunshine. While Colonel Verity, turning, caught sight of her, raised his hand in salutation; and, walking a little stiffly and deliberately in his high riding-boots, took his way towards her along the verandah. Thereby her prudent act of destruction was balked. For to smuggle her letter into hiding, still more to tear it up under his very nose, struck her as an altogether too undignified proceeding, silly, missy, merely encouraging observation and comment. Destruction must wait a more convenient season.

"Ah! so you are here," he said. "It is unexpected good fortune to find you. Are you busy—immersed in correspondence—or may I stay?"

Without waiting for her permission, he stepped carefully over the rampart of simpering dolls; and somewhat wearily, as though glad of ease and rest, dropped into a chair beside her.

"Here, give me your letters," he went on. "I will have them sent out with my midday mail. It will save a post."

Proximity is a most cogent argument. If, when seen from a distance, Charles Verity moved her, at close quarters the magnetism of living soul and body became well nigh invincible. Henrietta's wits and will, already in disarray, fell flat before it. No plausible excuse for withholding her letters occurred to her; while truth was, under the circumstances, obviously unrepresentable. After briefest hesitation, she placed her disingenuous and evasive missive to Johnny Pereira in Colonel Verity's open hand. Then, for an instant, his fingers closed firmly on hers, holding them imprisoned, and he looked her in the eyes—whereat that same small internal spasm suffered immediate and very disquieting resurrection.

Henrietta shrank, for these signs were to her as the writing upon the wall, proclaiming ruin to the kingdom of Egeria. Not only had public opinion given its verdict against the kingdom in question last night, pronouncing the fascinating pastime suspect and position equivocal; but her own nerves, what with inward stabbings and flutterings, endorsed that adverse verdict. While, unless she was greatly mistaken, Charles Verity's existing attitude endorsed it likewise. For in his eyes and in his touch she read danger, impatience of self-imposed restraint; and a proposal—or demand was it?—that regard be permitted fuller development and the word friendship be exchanged for one of a less modest and moderate order.

"You are not looking quite yourself, my dear," he said, scrutinizing her. "I hope you were not too intolerably bored last night. Such functions are liable to be a weariness to the flesh. How did the banquet go off?"

"As well as could be expected, being so conspicuous an example of the play of Hamlet with the part of the Prince of Denmark leti out."

"Ah—thanks—that's very charming of you," he said. "Believe me I wanted to be with you. Heaven knows I did not stay away to save myself possible boredom. I was kept at home by singularly obnoxious business."

Colonel Verity finished speaking with a lift of the head. He looked away, while, to Henrietta's thinking, his face darkened ominously. So she had been right after all! Unpleasant hidden things were really taking place here at the Sutan-i-bagh. Curiosity skipped within her; but she had too much tact, or too little courage, to ask questions. She hastened, indeed, to change the subject.

"The Mackinders are delightful people. They did all in their power to be nice to me. I am really glad to have met them."

"Yes—Mackinder is an excellent fellow, a scholar, worth talking to, and she is a dear good woman. I have a great regard for her," he answered, absently. "Tell me, who else was there?"

Henrietta ran through the list, permitting herself some lively comment.

"Exactly. The cream of Bhutpur society. Now you have the measure of all the place offers me in the way of intellectual privileges and distractions. Not of an extravagantly high order, are they? I am thankful Fulleylove is laid by the heels with gout, though—it would have disgusted me he should be inflicted upon you. An elderly buffoon, such as Waterhouse, is trial enough; but an impotent old satyr like Fulleylove is simply damnable——"

He bent down, gently raised a golden-haired, spangle-robed damsel, who, fallen over sideways, lay sprawling.

"When age gets him, the beast waxes and God wanes in the average man to a revolting extent," he continued, smoothing the doll's disordered apparel and placing her so that her back was supported by the lower rail of a neighbouring chair. "Providence, I imagine, permits such exhibitions as a warning to one against ugly possibilities latent in oneself."

"No—no—not in your case, never in your case," Henrietta protested, strangely moved alike by admiration of him and by alarm.

Charles Verity's hands lingered a little, steadying the doll's limp person. Then raising himself, he lay back in his chair, and turned questioning, somewhat ironic, eyes upon Mrs. Pereira.

"Hesitate to prophesy, dear friend, unless you are prepared to give active help in bringing about the fulfilment of your prophesies."

"Ah! if only I could help!" she cried with genuine feeling, clasping her hands against her bosom—"but——"

"Never mind the buts. Let them wait. I have things to say. All I ask of you now is to listen."

"I listen, then," she returned, bracing herself to hear—she knew not what!

"You are good enough to care for Damaris."

Henrietta's hands sank on to her lap. Her pretty figure took an easier pose. She was conscious of an anti-climax.

"Of course, I am fond of Damaris. She is a wonderful child—so companionable, so intelligent. Who could help being interested in her?"

"The immediate future presents a problem. McCabe has been holding forth on the subject.—He spent last night here."

"Spent the night here?" Henrietta interrupted, curiosity skipping this time a bit beyond control.

"Yes—he and I sat up together till dawn."

Colonel Verity paused; but his expression forbade inquiry. Henrietta handled curiosity firmly, sustained by recognition that her consciousness of an anti-climax might be premature.

"In the intervals of certain professional ministrations," he continued grimly, "we had time for a good deal of conversation. McCabe told me it was risky to keep Damaris any longer in India. She ought to be sent home. The word, by the way, is singularly inappropriate in her case. This is her home. I suppose either of my sisters would be willing enough to have her.—There has been

some sort of understanding between us to that effect.— Unless, of course, I decide to retire, settle down on my property in England, and take care of her myself."

"Oh! but you cannot retire," Henrietta declared, Egeria vigorously to the fore once again. "Your position is too important. You could not be spared."

"You know better, my dear. No man is necessary—specially here in India. 'Turn down empty glass'—that is all it amounts to."

"No, it doesn't," she asserted, with pretty obstinacy. "I don't admit that for a moment. And, to put it at the lowest, the purely personal level—think of all you have fought for, fought against, and won! You owe it to yourself to stay on, owe it to your own methods and reputation. To resign would amount to a victory for your enemies.—No, you must not sacrifice your career to nervousness about dear little Damaris' health. It is out of proportion. Besides"—she smiled at him teasingly—"though you love Damaris, you know you love power too."

"Can there be any stronger assertion of power than the voluntary resignation of it?" he asked, with an answering smile.—Verily, she was a beguiling creature. He enjoyed her vastly when she rounded on him thus.—"But to return to the wise child—for she is the text of the sermon to which you promised me to listen.—Both my sisters are worthy women in their way. The unmarried one, Felicia, you have met."

"Yes, at Tullingworth," Henrietta murmured.

That meeting was not a matter of glad memories. Felicia Verity, though gushing, unconsciously revealed much county-family surprise that this little Anglo-Indian acquaintance of her brother's should have such good manners and be so much more presentable generally than she had anticipated.

"A fond, flighty, ineffectual thing," Charles Verity continued, "for ever conferring benefits on other people

which they don't ask for or want. I am as convinced of the purity of her aims and excellence of her intentions, as of her utter absence of common-sense."

This description was as balm to Henrietta. She put on a delicious little air of protest and reproof.

"My half-sister, Mrs. Cowden, is cast in a sterner mould. From the day of my poor mother's death to that of her own marriage she made Canton Magna hateful to me. She is always equal to the occasion and always in the right. Augustus Cowden, whom she married, is the younger brother of Lord Bulparc. Formerly he was in the Guards. Now he hunts three days a week with the East Hants hounds and breeds pedigree pigs.—There you have the frame to his life. He never steps outside it. My sister sits upon him; but as on a throne, he being, after all, of noble birth. Is his name not written in Debrett? And is not Debrett the Holy Book—word of God, in fact—to which, though she professes piety, her Bible comes in a bad second? Now, I ask you, my dear, how can I entrust the education and upbringing of Damaris to either of these ladies with any sort of satisfaction or confidence? The one would drown her in false sentiment and all manner of moth-eaten virginalities—being herself quite amazingly and abysmally unwed."

Henrietta's spirits rose. The implication might be a trifle coarse, but it amused her.

"The other would cram her full up with worldliness and vulgar prejudice, killing phariseeism in her—and Damaris is a poetic creature—would make her hopelessly conventional. I cannot have her nature wrested away from its centre. Besides," he broke out, with a sombre heat most disconcerting to his self-nominated Egeria, "I want the child myself. To me she is as a well in the desert. She stands between me and those ugly possibilities, keeping the god alive and the beast at bay in me. I dread to let her be away. When I do so, life may—will, if I know myself—go basely with me. For she is part of me, the

sanest, cleanest part. From her birth she has belonged to me, and to me only."

Here, its equilibrium again upset by a puff of the pleasant northerly breeze, the golden-haired doll slipped over sideways, its eyes closing, as it fell, with a little rattle. And again, Charles Verity raising himself in his chair, stooped down and carefully set it in place.

"I suppose," he said, speaking low, a perceptible hoarseness in his utterance, "no woman fixes her entire thought and purpose upon a man, surrendering herself wholly, as Agnes Hackwood did, without developing an almost terrible prescience in respect of him. Thereby she often divines just those things he has been at pains not to tell her. And such divination, though it fall short of words, even of images, awakens jealousies and antagonisms which torment and consume. Such, I take it, is what a woman, the first enchantments past, generally pays for a grand passion!—Agnes, I am pretty sure, paid it to the full, poor child. You see I married her not to please myself, but to make her happy—as a sort of quit-rent towards your sex, death very much sitting on my threshold just then. In point of fact, I made her profoundly unhappy after the first few months, because while she gave her all, I had only a part to give. This she understood, owing to that rather terrible prescience of which I have spoken—though she was too loyal to tell me so, to as much as hint at it. Looking back, as I see things now, her restraint was nothing short of heroic."

Charles Verity ceased; but his hearer did not offer sympathetic comment. Mention of his dead wife, still more, praise of her, at once irritated and calmed Henrietta—mustard-plaster-like. It produced a stimulating effect upon her circulation, so that her features ceased to be drawn or her cheeks wan. She looked, indeed, rarely lovely, sitting erect, still yet sprightly, her chin in the air, the whole length of her slender throat outlined, on the left, by that long, dependent curl. Johnny Pereira, both as

a matter of duty and place of safety, meanwhile, fell out of the count, and, in his rear, went prudence and policy. Let her letter be posted, by all means, for at Bhutpur she now very positively intended to stay!

Here Colonel Verity broke silence.

"The first child was a boy. Agnes was cruelly long in labour. It came to a choice between the two lives. The doctors asked me, and—well—my son was born dead."

Henrietta uttered an exclamation, but less of pity than of acute distaste. The ordained mode of human entry into this world was deplorably uncivilized, in her opinion, a matter about which the less said the better. Hence Colonel Verity's statement moved her, not as tragedy, but only to disgust.

"Agnes mourned her baby in brooding and resentful sorrow. It was very piteous. I hoped a second child would bring her peace. But when Damaris was born, she turned her face to the wall, her soul refusing comfort. She wanted a boy, in whom her dead—murdered—first-born should live again. She wanted a boy, too—and this I believe was the stronger reason—because, goaded by those dumb jealousies and antagonisms, she persuaded herself that in bearing me a son she would bind me to her in a special manner, and hold me to the exclusion of whatever might have taken place before she and I met."

"Was she right in that idea?" Henrietta inquired coldly; and, as she knew, greatly daring. But something deeper than mere curiosity moved her to speech; namely, keen rivalry, a keen necessity to assert herself.

Charles Verity kept his eyes upon the semicircle of simpering waxen, wooden, china and rag faces.

"You have the right to ask, since I have told you so much. But I can only answer—yes and no. For Agnes' divination at once overshot and fell short of the mark; as such divination almost inevitably must, a woman's ways not being a man's ways, or her thoughts his thoughts.—

And at that I left it. I judged it best for both of us not to explain."

"And why?" Mrs. Pereira demanded, excited for once to the verge of recklessness.

Colonel Verity waited before replying. Raised his eyebrows, glancing searchingly at her for an instant. Then he looked down fixedly at the dolls again, while a frolic wind, drawing in from under the portico, snatched mischievously at Mrs. Pereira's lilac and white muslin flounces and fluttered them, with a delicate, hurried clinging, against his high riding-boots. Instinctively she backed her chair and drew her flirtatious skirts aside, thus widening the distance between herself and her companion.

"Why?" he said. "Because, my dear, the matter at issue touched the secret places of another woman's life—a woman, by the way, whom you have never seen or heard of. And because I hold the man a cur who gratifies his private vanity—for that's all it really comes to—by maundering to his wife about pre-nuptial enterprises of a certain character."

IV

MRS. PEREIRA felt her temerity rebuked. Her face flamed. Yet she neither resented the rebuke nor regretted the temerity which provoked it. For she perceived that, in making these very peculiar statements, Charles Verity admitted her to a closer confidence than, upon his own showing, he had ever admitted his poor little wife. Hence her blush advertised triumph rather than shame; while, pleased and impenitent, her manner relaxed to a graceful playfulness.

"Have we not lighted on rather perilous topics, dear friend?" she asked. "Through my indiscretion, I know. It was unpardonable to be so inquisitive. Still, do pray forgive me. Everything which concerns you is of such deep interest to me.—This is my only excuse, but it is one which bespeaks mercy, doesn't it? And you must own you tempted me——"

She hesitated, in apparent confusion, that fine flame still irradiating her countenance. To Charles Verity her beauty had never been more exquisite or more refined.

"Should we not do well to return, once again, to our text—namely, Damaris?" she continued. "That topic is not only a safe, but a vastly engaging one. As you probably know, I make no pretence of being an indiscriminate child-lover. I find my own generation far less exhausting. The infant mind levies too heavy a tax on my imagination; let alone the difficulty I experience in interpreting the infant speech. Baby-talk is beyond me. But Damaris is a

person by herself, and marvellously good company. Her little manners are so distinguished, quite duchessy, in fact.— Oh ! yes, putting aside any of those deeper reasons of which you speak, out of my own feeling towards Damaris I can understand your unwillingness to have her leave you."

Henrietta looked down, a wistful and most unaccustomed tenderness in her expression.

"I never supposed any child could attract me so greatly. Indeed, I am half afraid she has created a new want in me, and that I shall miss her pretty ways a little too much for my own peace of mind when she and I are parted."

"Why part from her, then ?"

Startled both by his words and tone, Mrs. Pereira looked up sharply.

"Since when, dear friend, have you taken to talking nonsense ?" she inquired, with affected lightness.

"I was never further from talking nonsense. The parting is entirely optional—you cannot pretend you don't know that."

"Indeed I know nothing of the sort," she declared, in honest bewilderment. "Didn't you tell me—was not it the starting point of this rather extraordinary conversation—how reluctant you were to give Damaris up, how you dread separation from her ?"

"Distinctly," he returned. "I merely widen my contention, thereby making it no less true, though more comprehensive. For I cannot consent to give you up or accept separation from you, either. Damaris, as I have already explained, belongs to me and to me only. You belong to me also, my dear, and for equally good reasons. Therefore I propose to keep you both."

While making this audacious statement, Charles Verity stretched a little, as with a certain vital enjoyment, lying back, his legs crossed, his lean, shapely hands resting idly along the flat wooden arms of the chair, his strangely accentuated, strangely handsome face turned upon Mrs. Pereira, with a glint of soundless laughter in the eyes and

upon the lips, dazzling, and—perhaps—somewhat awful to see.

"Yes, my dear," he repeated, while his voice took on a chanting cadence, even as Damaris' voice, during her ecstasy of improvisation to her audience of dolls—"I propose to keep you both. It will be wisest so, very much wisest, as I see it, for all three of us. Of your own free will you sought me out and came here to me. Now, not without sore struggle, I warn you, will I let you depart. For I intend we shall go back, you and I—plus the wise child, that one good and perfect fruit of the past seven very weary years—to the point where poor Adams' death would have placed us had I not fallen, through cowardly self-righteousness, but waited until you were free. I propose to obliterate my marriage—barring Damaris' existence—to obliterate your second marriage, and take up the story again where it broke off seven years ago. I offer no apologies. I advance no arguments. I claim you, just simply claim you, in the name of the love I bore you in the old dear unhappy days at Poonah, and in that of the love I find I bear you, here and now, as strongly as ever still."

Turning on his elbow, he leaned nearer to her across the arm of the chair.

"Why beat about the bush? Why try to throw dust in one another's eyes or lie to one another? Surely we are mature enough to be honest, you and I, afraid neither of ourselves nor of fact! You know that I love you—love you so well that I have let you dwell here, under my roof, in perfect honour and security, though with a mighty longing I have longed for you night and day. You know, too, that if ever you have loved or if you do love, it was not, and is not, either Adams—poor fellow—whom you married when you were a mere school-girl, or the man whom you are married to now, but—me, my dear, me. In your heart, in your conscience, you know this is so.—Very well, then, be true to your own

heart, true to your own conscience, true to love, and stay with me. Or rather come with me. For Bhutpur, the place of ghosts, I will leave to ghosts—its rightful inhabitants—and go forth with you and Damaris, the living woman and living child that I love, to seek fortune elsewhere."

He sprang up, stepping—heedlessly this time—over the rampart of dolls—who toppled to right and left in the draught of his passing—and began ranging restlessly up and down the alley-way free of furniture just within the pillars and arches of the verandah.

"My soul is sick of interference, detraction, spite and cabals," he said bitterly. "At every turn my plans are frustrated by official jealousies here in India and by the shrieking of ignorant sentimentalists at home. I have given the best years of my life to my country's service, and Government alternately suspects my motives and deplures my methods, snubs, flatters, misinterprets and misjudges me. And, as though this were not enough, the members of my own household begin to turn on me—the woman whom I once rescued, the lad—thick-headed dolt—whom I have trained. Before God, I am weary, utterly weary of it all! Against stupidity heaven itself fights in vain. The stupidity of England is colossal where India is concerned. And the stupidity of—well, let it pass.—They have asked to eat dirt, and eat it they shall."—

He paused a minute, swung back and stood over Henrietta Pereira, looking down at her—his russet-grey eyes steady and luminous—formidable yet graceful as some spare and stately bird of prey.

"Ah! my dear, forgive me, if I have spoken unadvisedly with my tongue. But before you came I had practically decided to throw up my appointment—go home and bury myself, my disgust and my defeated purposes, at Deadham Hard, the wistful little place on Marychurch Haven overlooking the tide river, where I used to be

happy as a boy. I meant to sit down there and wait, possessing my soul in such patience as I could command, till death, claiming me, blotted out remembrance of England's ingratitude towards those who spend themselves in the creation and maintenance of her empire overseas. I only share the fate of far bigger men than myself. From the day of Warren Hastings till our own, the story has always been the same. It is foolish to gird at it. But recently, since you have been here with me, I have seen things in a different light—have found the push of life in me, and the challenge of ambition, as vigorous as ever. I must go forward rather than go back. I can't consent to rot in idleness till death orders me to send in my papers."

"No—no"—Henrietta cried, overcome, shaken out of her pettiness and artificiality. She rose to her feet, her hands outspread, her face working with emotion.

Colonel Verity put his arm round her shoulders and, for the moment, so lost, so dazzled was she, that she uttered no protest, offered no resistance.

"I have secret information," he said rapidly, under his breath. "Before the year is out there will be wild doings in Cabul. Shere Ali trusts me and wants me—would give me any command I was willing to accept if I engage to remain with him to the end and support him, through the cut-throat business which is bound to come before his brothers forgo their pretensions to his throne and submit."

Charles Verity's voice sank yet lower, became soft and caressing, notwithstanding a heat and vibration in it. His arm tightened around Henrietta's shoulders.

"My beloved, dare you forswear the flesh-pots of this somewhat scandalous and ignoble Anglo-Indian Egypt?" he said. "Dare you trust yourself to me for good and all? Dare you come? No—don't answer yet.—Give yourself time to measure both the cost and the glory, for both are great. But this I tell you, if you dare come,

your name shall figure in history with those of its fairest and most famous women. I will write it, alongside my own, beyond the Khyber and the mountains, across the northern horizon where Russia threatens, in letters of gold and of jewels, or, if needs be, in letters of steel and of blood."

V

A HARSH, guttural cry out in the tremendous sunshine, swift padding of bare feet on the marble steps, and a youth, mother-naked save for the wisp of cotton cloth about his loins, confronted the ruffling chuprassies in the shade of the portico. His eyes were bloodshot, his face vacant of expression, tongue hanging out and corners of the mouth drawn back like those of a hound sorely spent with running. Muscular, though slightly built, the polished bronze of his body and limbs was scored by runnels of dusty sweat; while, as soon as he could gather breath for articulate speech, he called aloud upon the name of the great Commissioner Sahib to whom he brought tidings from afar.

Hearing the strange outcry Mrs. Pereira and Colonel Verity moved apart; the latter, with lifted head, looking round in arrogant displeasure to discover who this disturber of the forenoon quiet might be. But, as he looked, anger yielded to long established habit—visionary and imperious lover giving place to practical, if equally imperious ruler, summoned by affairs of state.

"Forgive my leaving you," he said; "I must hear what news this wild creature brings. But wait for me here—here, you understand, my dear. Whatever his business, it shall not keep me long. I will come back to you."

For all answer Henrietta bowed her charming head. She was incapable of words just then, incapable indeed of

coherent thought. Stupefaction reigned in her. She felt dizzy, even a little faint, stepped back to her chair again and sat there motionless, devoid of volition, almost devoid of sensation, obediently waiting.

Five, ten, the better part of twenty minutes passed, before Colonel Verity closed his interview with the scantily clad native runner. The news—whatever its nature—took long in the telling, while the listener's aspect grew more severe, more absorbed, minute by minute. Retainers of the big establishment, meantime, scenting calamity, slipped out from offices, garden and stables, congregating about steps and doorways; to be driven off, not without brandishing of staves and ingenious maledictions, by the scarlet and gold-coated chuprassies.

Presently Lugard sauntered out from the house, and stopped with an air of rather puzzled inquiry; for, to his mystification, narrative, question and answer went forward in a dialect of which he was ignorant. But, the interview at last closed, Colonel Verity turned to him and, taking his arm, walked slowly back into the verandah, speaking in a low voice.

"Murdered, sir!" Lugard exclaimed in answer. "But it's beyond belief.—Clatworthy murdered! Why, he was up here only last week to meet that Oxford chum of his, Lathrop Evans—and in such rattling good spirits too. Reported everything going swimmingly at Kankarpur, not a whisper of friction or bother of any sort. And to think of him dead—strangled, you say? My God! it's too ghastly. What does it mean, sir?"

"That is precisely what I have to find out."

And as Colonel Verity spoke, Lugard looking round at him, remembered the scene in Hockless' sick-room yesterday evening. Remembered the ugly gossip at the club, for which—according to Jimmy—the unhappy young Assistant Deputy Collector was responsible. Remembered the latter's reported boast of the confidence reposed in him by the natives of position.—Did the chief remember

it also? Lugard wondered. Well—if Clatworthy had foolishly bragged or foully slandered, terrible retribution followed hard on his folly and fault! Would not the chief take that into consideration?—Of course, Lugard told himself—while tears smarted in his eyes at thought of the other young man's fate—of course he would.

Meanwhile, as though Colonel Verity read his thought, the pressure of the hand lying on his arm increased.

"Pull yourself together, Maurice. There is much to be done, and I count on you for support."

"I beg your pardon, sir. I'll be all right in a minute. But the news is so confoundedly sudden. It knocks one all of a heap to be taken by surprise like this."

"The longer your service, the more you will know that India always takes one by surprise," Colonel Verity said. "It is her way.—The way of a conquered country, for ever jumping surprises upon its conquerors, because for ever brooding over just all that which it is their prime object to ignore and to forget. Hence Clatworthy's death. He was over confident of his own power and popularity—puffed up. And his self-sufficiency has proved his undoing. His death may be just an isolated act of violence, or be an indication of organized and widespread unrest—which last, heaven forbid, lest there be more and worse to follow. But, in either case, the cause is identical—hatred on the part of the subject race. Perfectly natural and reasonable from their standpoint.—I don't blame them for hating us; but neither do I tolerate that hatred when it takes an active form—such as the murder of even the most blatantly cocksure of my young officials."

He swung aside, withdrawing his hand almost roughly from Lugard's arm.

"To understand is not to pardon," he said, "unless one is willing to let law and order—private as well as public—reel back into chaos. I cannot eradicate these people's hatred; but I can find means to render it abortive—for a time at all events. I have done so before now——"

"Then you will avenge Clatworthy, sir?"

Lugard spoke under his breath, somewhat awed by the older man's tone.

"What else can I do? Those Kankarpur zemindars have given trouble from the first—an unruly, headstrong generation, with the guile of Old Nick and the bearing of princes. Handsome, soft-spoken scoundrels, made of very different stuff, I promise you, to the book-in-breeches Oxford dons upon whom Clatworthy modelled himself. No doubt they bamboozled and flattered him to the top of his bent, until he honestly believed, as he told you, all was going swimmingly at Kankarpur. Went on believing it till, in the brief light-fingered dusk, the silk handkerchief whipped round his throat gave him the measure of Oriental friendship, as it sent the life gurgling out of him in quick horror and amazement."

Charles Verity threw back his head, with a smile, sharp-edged, ironical, dashed by contemptuous pity not altogether agreeable to see.

"Poor young fool, poor young fool," he repeated, "what a legacy of woe, thanks to that same obstinate self-sufficiency, he leaves behind! For such gaieties on the part of the subject race must be paid in kind; and strange fruit may hang on the trees of Kankarpur before many weeks are out."

He spoke thus at length, as much to relieve his own bitterness of spirit as to give Lugard time in which to recover composure. Immense discouragement assailed him. For was he not called on to punish, to make examples, and thereby incur fresh odium, all for the sake of a pig-headed young prig who had traduced and befouled him?—Oh! the weariness of rule in India, of this unending struggle with natural forces—comparable only, as it seemed to him just then, to the doom of Sisyphus, for ever rolling the great stone uphill, to have it, effort for one instant being relaxed, incontinently roll down again!

Upon Maurice Lugard, whose sympathetic temperament was rendered doubly receptive by recent emotion, his chief's humour reacted as atmosphere reacts upon a sensitive plate. Apprehending something of that inward conflict between the sense of personal injury and of official, racial obligation, the young Irishman's enthusiasm caught generously alight. His thought became lyrical; while he told himself—as how often before!—that here was indeed a man of heroic build, clear-sighted, unsparing of himself, tireless in action and in achievement as some paladin of old. To spend yourself in his service, to forward, still better to share, his undertakings, was to help write an epic, of which the finest living poet might be proud, let alone an, as yet, obscure young Indian civilian such as himself.

But when the object of his worship spoke again, tone and manner had changed from elegiac to peremptory.

"Send word to Mr. Mackinder that I desire to see him on matters of serious importance. Hurry him up; but be careful to put it civilly. I don't want him rubbed the wrong way."

"Very well, sir," Lugard answered.

"And—see here—don't bring me any correspondence which is not urgent. I have no time for business this morning, which will keep—you understand? And—this for your own information, Maurice—the subject of Clatworthy's death is to be mentioned to no one. I shall start for Kankarpur myself as soon as it is sufficiently cool. Luckily there is a moon. By riding throughout the night I should reach his bungalow at dawn. The body must be identified while it is still—well—recognizable; and be given decent burial.—But remember, if any questions are asked, you do not know where I have gone nor why."

"Very well, sir," the other repeated.

"That is all—at present. Send at once to Mr. Mackinder. The court does not sit to-day, so he will

be at home. The rest of my orders I will give to Ismail Ali.—You hear ? ”

And he walked a few paces nearer to the little writing-table and semicircle of simpering dolls.

But, regardless of dismissal, Lugard lingered, his handsome young face eager both from anxiety and from the admiration he bore the speaker.

“ You aren’t going without some sort of escort, sir ? ” he ventured at last. “ You’ll let me be of the party ? ”

“ Party—what party ? ” Colonel Verity demanded curtly, over his shoulder. “ Ismail Ali goes with me—not a soul else. To start with a cavalcade would set tongues wagging, and warnings racing hot-foot into Kankarpur. I intend to take these strangling gentry unaware, drop on them out of a clear sky. A quiet evening ride with my old servant tells nothing. Besides, Maurice”—he turned kindly to the young man—“ I need you here. I have every confidence in your loyalty and good sense, and have no hesitation in leaving my house and people, my daughter and”—he paused an instant—“ my guest, in your keeping.”

Lugard flushed. The compliment was great, yet he received it with mixed feelings. The presence of that same guest, for instance, he could well have dispensed with—and then, too, his heart yearned strangely over his hero.

“ I quite measure the honour you do me, and I am awfully grateful to you for trusting me, sir——”

“ Well, what then ? ” the other broke in sharply, as he hesitated.

“ This, sir—though no doubt you know best and it is presumptuous of me, I suppose, to offer any opinion. But I can’t help myself. I’m too deadly scared. Doesn’t the whole affair look villainously like a trap ? ”

“ With wretched Clatworthy’s body as bait to draw the old tiger ? No, on the whole I think not. The game would be too hazardous ; for though I give these Kankar-

pur people credit for abundant treachery, I give them credit for plenty of superstition as well. They daren't touch me. They would be too much afraid of the consequences."

Colonel Verity clasped his hands behind him, and stood looking down, his head forward, his shoulders a little humped up.

"I have the reputation of a mighty hunter before the Lord," he said—"a man-hunter, to whom belong queer, possibly supernatural, powers. So they are none too sure that, in killing my body, they might not merely be setting my soul free to go on with its hunting after a most inconvenient fashion—plague, fever, accident, murrain upon their cattle, failure of their crops through drought. What if my vindictive ghost shut the windows of heaven against them and forced the monsoon to run backward to the coast?—No, my dear boy, make yourself easy. They dare not lay a finger on me. As far as local unrest is concerned, there is no fear but that I shall be spared to die stupidly, rottingly, of old age in my bed."

He looked up, his eyes and the soundless laughter of them meeting Lugard's eyes with a flash—looked past and beyond him to where, elegant and very feminine in her small-waisted, full-skirted lavender muslin gown, exquisitely artificial, a human product as far removed from the animals as—possibly—from the angels, Mrs. Pereira sat beside the little writing-table, her taper-fingered hands lying idle in her lap.

Whereupon a notable change passed over Colonel Verity's countenance. All effect of laughter, whether kindly or ironical, shut off short; and an expression took its place which set the blood beating big drums inside Lugard's head. The object of his worship was worshipful still, romantic, in a sense magnificent; only, with a painful revulsion of feeling, the young man discovered that he had taken service under Sir Lancelot rather than—as he fondly imagined—under Sir Galahad.

In mid-nineteenth century idealism was ingenuously rampant, science not having, as yet, smiled What-Should-Be off the stage in favour of What-Actually-Is.—Lugard was by nature susceptible. He was also past the age of innocence; yet idealism, What-Should-Be, still held him captive where he revered and loved. A chivalrous cleanliness ruled his attitude towards womanhood moreover. Very honestly he strove to resist fleshly temptation; and more especially to resist all coveting of his neighbour's wife. It hurt him very shrewdly, therefore, to believe Hockless' ravings in some sort justified, and to find his own particular great man but as lesser men are in their relation to the disquieting sex.

"I'll send round to Mr. Mackinder immediately, sir," he said huskily, stumbling over a chair in his haste to get away, so blurred was his sight.

VI

"**A**T last, my dear, at last," Charles Verity exclaimed as, striding over the rampart of dolls, he dropped into the chair beside Mrs. Pereira. "I couldn't bear keeping you waiting so long; but the ends of the earth were upon me."

Henrietta's response was of the vaguest.

Life may—in the vast majority of cases does, granted ordinary civilized conditions—travel along even lines for years together. Then, on a sudden, minutes suffice to revolutionize the whole outlook—minutes upon which, even for the most pertinaciously light-minded, there is no going back. They rank; and as long as individual consciousness continues, must continue to rank. Such minutes had overtaken Henrietta, and the first amazements of a revolutionized outlook stupefied her still.

During that part of her host's discourse immediately preceding the advent of the native runner, she had remained passive and silent for the very excellent reason that she was incapable of doing anything else. As well attempt to stay the course of storm-wind or tempest! Her neatly conditioned feminine mind struck work amid such elemental tumult, intelligence refusing to grasp or reason to formulate. Swept off her feet by the torrent of words, the eloquent voice, the at once pleading and conquering presence, she was carried forward, mute, inert, helpless, along with scattered wreckage of her poor fictitious little kingdom of Egeria. For that the said kingdom had suffered shipwreck, complete and irretrievable, she clearly

perceived, whatever her mental confusion in other directions. That fact was incontrovertible in face of the concluding sentences of Charles Verity's discourse.

So far Henrietta had been guilty of venial sins only, of the small cruelties, treacheries, vanities and self-seekings which the average pretty and popular woman commits and—in her own case—condones every day. Now mortal sin invited her; since—hence Egerian ruin complete and irretrievable—her host had made certain overtures to her which outraged virtue should, unquestionably, repulse with positive shriekings of scorn and disgust. Only, strange to say, outraged virtue had done nothing of the sort. Instead of rushing vociferously to her protection, it had remained mum as a mouse. And why?—Added stupefaction. What, she asked herself, in the name of all her gay, adroit, respectable little past, could it mean?

And now as Charles Verity, words of apology on his lips, dropped into the chair beside her, she still asked herself that same question, still stared helplessly at a topsy-turvy, disconcertingly revolutionized world. A marionette mislaid on the field of battle would have been as much in place, as Henrietta thus at grips with invitation to breach of a certain commandment!

Something of her distraction Charles Verity apprehended; and as author, in great measure, of that same distraction was touched both by compunction and an indulgent half-amused tenderness. Had he overrated her toughness, the resistant quality in her? Was she fashioned of more fragile, more brittle stuff than he had supposed? Perhaps she charmed him none the less for that! He took a gently teasing tone with her.

"Have I been too sudden, given you too sharp a shock—or is this only another of your delicious manœuvres, my dear?" he asked.

Henrietta looked on the ground, keeping her face averted.

"I don't know," she said plaintively. "I dare say it is very silly, but—really—I don't know."

"Oh! come, come, my poor dear."

Colonel Verity leaned sideways over the arm of his chair watching her. She was fascinating thus. He enjoyed watching her—the graceful turn of her head, the long smooth curl following the line of her throat, the rise and fall of her bosom.—How delicately made, how tastefully finished she was! Nevertheless, the tide of passion had been stayed, and he played with, rather than fought for her now. Those evil tidings from Kankarpur, all which they entailed, the bitter reflections they raised, held the first place. She, much though she delighted him, was relegated to the second.

"I spoke too plainly perhaps," he went on. "But, upon my soul, I believed I only put into words certain truths which we both had reckoned with and accepted. All the same, I measure what I ask—it is a good deal. I don't want to rush you into decision."

He rested his elbow on the chair-arm, his chin in the palm of his hand. Amusement faded. Decidedly Kankarpur held the first place.

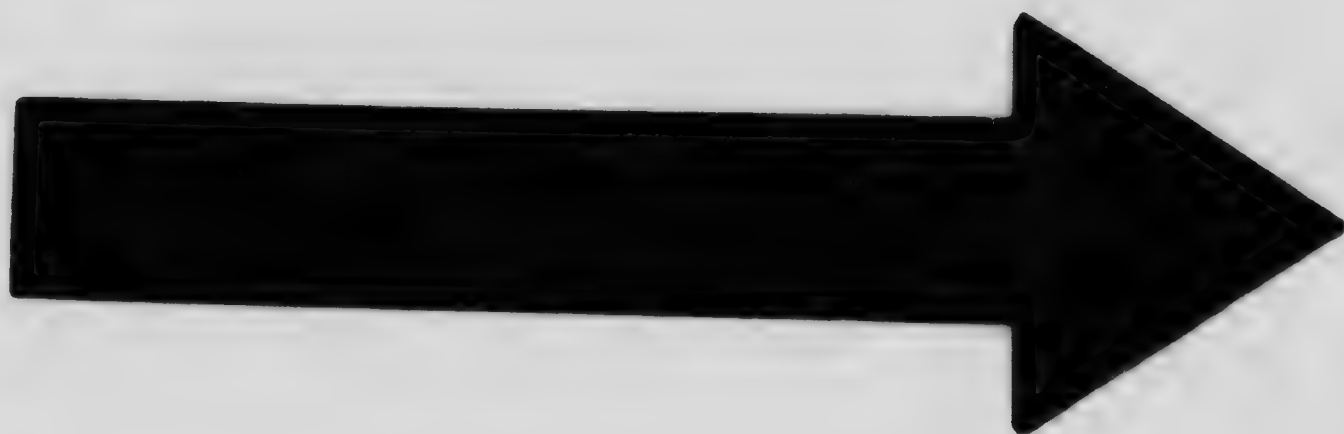
"You heard what I was telling Lugard?"

"I did not attend," she returned, still plaintive, but slightly perverse too, her face averted. For, distraction notwithstanding, she was sensible his ardour had cooled; and, Egerian ruin now an admitted fact, however embarrassing that ardour, she didn't—somehow—desire to have it cool altogether!

"Perhaps it is as well you did not attend," he said. "It was not an agreeable story. But it obliges me to go to a distant part of the district for a few days, to set matters straight. During my absence you will have time, my dear, to think everything over quietly."

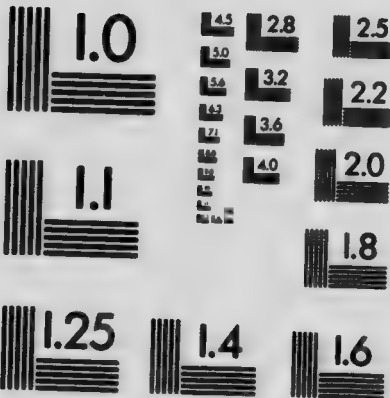
Henrietta rose, and gathered her writing materials together.

"Yes," she replied. "No doubt that will be best. I



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know I am stupid this morning. Really I need time in which to arrange my ideas a little—and, as you suggest to think.”

She glanced round at him, moved away quickly and lightly amid a pretty flutter of lavender muslin skirts, towards the open window just behind.

For a minute, Colonel Verity remained, still leaning sideways, his chin in his hand, lost in thought. Then suddenly he roused himself, sprang to his feet, and swung after her into the great drawing-room, with its dark carven furniture, red lacquer cabinets, and cut glass chandeliers, the many dangling pear-shaped lustres of which glittered coldly in the subdued light.

“Stop, Henrietta,” he commanded.

And, overtaking her there in the dimness and silence, he laid hold of her, crushing her against him, kissing her hair, her ear, her throat. Then he put her from him, holding her at arm's length.

“Now you are mine,” he said. “Though this is only the preface.”

He looked down at her, his eyes coldly brilliant as the dangling lustres above his head.

“I shall be back in three days. Take every care of yourself. I leave you a houseful of slaves, and Maurice Lugard as their master and your servant. Have no fear of the future, my dear. I can shape it to your fancy—and to my own. You promise me to stay till I come back?”

“Yes, yes, I promise—I promise,” Henrietta cried, gasping, without wish or will of her own, broken for the moment.

“Good-bye, then.—Remember, take care of yourself. Ah! it is infinitely sweet to think of you here, to know I shall find you and Damaris waiting for me at home when I come back.”

And with that he swung away through the open window again. And Henrietta, sitting down very hastily upon the nearest couch, heard the husky tramp of his footsteps on the floor matting outside grow faint and fainter, and cease.

VII

ONCE the sound of those retreating footsteps stilled, Mrs. Pereira's instinct was of concealment and of flight. She fluttered away to the terra-cotta walled corner room upstairs, bidding Josepha Maria bolt the door within, and Aloysius, her Goanese boy, mount guard without. Then, pleading that useful and rather overworked mid-Victorian ailment, a headache, she prepared to spend the rest of the day in seclusion and a light blue China silk dressing-gown frilled with lace.

Headache, it should be added, was on this occasion no fiction. Pain very really darted and throbbed, despite cold compresses, gentle pressings and strokings administered by Josepha Maria, and delicacies of food presented at due intervals by Aloysius. But Henrietta had no wish to eat. She felt wretched, felt sick, lying with closed eyes on the bed within the shelter of the mosquito netting—though, in a way, grateful so to feel, since bodily discomfort tended to banish thought of all save its very disagreeable self. And there was very much of which she desired to put off thinking as long as possible; being aware that stupefaction threatened, as time elapsed, to give place to clear seeing of a radically alarming character.

So the hours dragged on till towards sundown, when, after throwing wide the range of French windows to let in whatever of evening freshness might exist, Josepha Maria broke into wheedling talk.

"My lady is now safe from annoyance," she declared, approaching the bed. "She is free to take the air upon the gallery without molestation. Will she not therefore rise? Nay, she is indeed safe, for has not the Missibaba gone forth to drive?"

"Alone?" Henrietta murmured, with reluctantly awakened interest.

The woman busied herself in looping back the mosquito curtains.

"If it should be called alone when a coachman, a bearer, two grooms, and the soldier-widow-woman accompany her! Yet went she weeping."

"But why?" Henrietta asked. It affected, distressed her oddly to think of Damaris in tears.

"Has she not been to my lady's door twenty times to-day," Josepha Maria replied, the tap of conversation now fully set running, "and used words to Aloysius which should be used only to a dog, because, obeying my lady's commands, he would not let her enter? And has not the soldier-widow-woman fetched her back in wrath, upbraiding her for disobedience until she cried aloud in shame and anger."

"Poor baby," Henrietta sighed.

She disliked Sarah Watson, had done so from the first; and did not this go to justify her dislike? Henrietta's mind began to weave idly, protecting Damaris from imagined injuries. Watson's position was a peculiar one. Practically there was no supervision; and how could one be sure she was really kind to the child shut away there in the nursery? Might it not be happier for Damaris if she and her nurse were parted? If——

But there Henrietta checked her weaving. She slipped off the low bed forgetful of headache; and after pausing before the cheval glass to review her own charming person—slender and girlish without accentuations of corset or crinoline—she walked languidly across to the open window, Josepha Maria at her elbow.

"Ah! yes, it is well they should go out to drive and leave my lady in peace for a little space," the latter went on, the tap running once more. "Already is she better, the air revives her. Too much happens in this place. Peace is far from it. The poor young Hockless Sahib sick, almost to death, downstairs, and all save old Buddhu forbidden to approach him.—It is Aloysius who tells me these things.—Last night his shoutings were as those of one in torment. And then this morning—Do I not know the reason of my lady ailing to-day?"—

Henrietta, stepping on to the gallery, looked round in most uncomfortable surprise. The fact of Hockless' serious illness was new to her. It might explain—But there again she checked inclination to weaving, Josepha's final statement filling her with suspicion.—She prepared to administer sharp reproof. Hesitated, in mingled curiosity and alarm. For would it not be safer to hear Josepha's version of what had occurred—if version she had—first?

"Be careful! You and Aloysius talk too freely," she said, as she knew, very feebly.

"It is no secret. The servants all speak of it. Did they not hear and see, many being gathered in the hall and upon the portico?"

"Heavens and earth!" Henrietta exclaimed, in a positive agony of apprehension.

She clutched at the frame of the tall casement to steady herself, bowing her pretty head. What had the servants seen, what overheard? What must they think? And news travels apace from one compound to another. Through the length and breadth of the Station by this time, what might not be believed and said?

"Nay, nay," Josepha put in soothingly, "my lady must not take it too much to heart. Always will there be wicked men. But is not my lady safe? Am I not here? Has she not Aloysius, and the others whom she brought with her from Delhi—rough fellows but faithful? And

does not the Commissioner Sahib himself ride away even now ? ”

“ Colonel Verity—the Commissioner—now ? ” Henrietta echoed, fairly at her wits’ end.

“ Truly—and in that is there not promise of security to all ? For is it not said throughout the region of Bhutpur, none can withstand him ? His voice is as the thunder at the breaking of the monsoon, and as the lightning does he strike. Men tremble before him, seeking to hide their deeds, as from the anger of God. Therefore may my lady take comfort, for is he not even now about to depart, when quickly, as sunrise among the mountains, all will be well ? ”

Her wheedling voice sank to a whisper.

“ It was thuggee,” she said. “ It is Aloysius, my brother, who has told me these things. Did they not talk of it in the cook-house when he fetched my lady’s lunch ? Still, to the shame of that city, are there Thugs in Kankarpur ; and with the romal was Clatworthy Sahib done to death as he walked in his compound, smoking, while the owls hooted in the dusk. But those who slew him had no grave prepared and——”

Here Henrietta interrupted the grisly recital, by breaking into a titter of nervous laughter, all sense of decorum going under before the immensity of her relief.

“ That—only that ! Of course—poor Mr. Clatworthy,” she cried. Then, recovering her self-control to some extent, she added : “ Enough, Josepha. Pray don’t go over the horrible details. I remember—I heard the Commissioner telling Mr. Lugard. You are right, that was what upset me so.”

She stepped across the gallery lightly, and stood within one of the horse-shoe headed archways, her arms outstretched, her finger tips playing a little joy-tune upon the flat top of the waist-high parapet.

“ Of course ”—she repeated—“ but the pain in my head has been so atrocious, I had almost forgotten how

my sickness began. Fetch me a chair, Josepha. I will stay here for a little. It will do me good."

At first the glare of the vast sky and sun-struck landscape so dazzled her, that she failed to distinguish any objects clearly in the blinding light. But soon she was sensible of a movement immediately below; and her sight steadied on to Lugard's figure at the foot of the steps, flanked by a crowd of the retainers and dependants of the Sultan-i-bagh. All faced one way, looking outward. Instinctively she looked with them—looked, just in time to see Colonel Verity and Ismail Ali, sometime his orderly, now his steward and body servant, turn from the carriage drive into the avenue and head north-eastward, past the cantonments, through the tender shade of the tamarind trees.

Riders and horses alike bore themselves proudly, with an ample and insolent grace possible in a country still fundamentally barbaric. But, whereas the leader's pride was of an austere and lofty sort, the follower frankly swaggered—his green turban tied with a knowing cock, his henna-dyed beard flaming in the slanting sunlight as he reined the brown stallion back on its haunches, making it rear and dance.

The scene was typically Oriental; and it is hardly an exaggeration to describe Henrietta Pereira's attitude, when witnessing it, as typically Oriental likewise. For in this—according to Josepha—place of too many happenings, something new, unexpected and—when later she came to review it calmly—altogether inexplicable happened to her.

She was aware of a draught, or rather column of chill air, which fitfully lifted the lace frills of her dressing-gown while encircling or—was it?—standing beside her, pressing, insistently, amorously against her. Once more she felt Charles Verity's kisses, hot, urgently masterful upon her hair and throat; and heard his words—"You are mine, though this is the preface only." And thus

hearing, thus feeling, the thousand and one interests and activities of an educated English woman, rules of conduct she heretofore had obeyed, tastes she affected, prejudices she cherished, fell strangely away from her. Her mentality, her very nature, suffered change. The spirit of veiled Eastern women, inhabitants of this princely dwelling in its former pleasure-palace days, invaded her, compelling her to watch, as they so many times had watched through the archways set high in the ochre-stained wall, a Lord and Master—he whose favour they desired perpetually, absolutely, without before or after, sole thought and object, the begin all end all of their voluptuous, monotonous and jealously secluded years—ride forth, even as Charles Verity now rode forth, upon some epic errand of sport, intrigue, revenge or war.

She ceased to lament the ruined kingdom of Egeria. Granting it had ever really existed, that sovereignty, as she now recognized, was of a very pallid and academic sort. Not Charles Verity's career, and any hand she might bear in the shaping of it, now held her fancy captive; but simply the man, Charles Verity, in and by himself. And more than her fancy, merely, was thus held captive, since in her present humour the claims of the body made themselves heard. This last, indeed, showed as hall-mark of the change operating within her.

Thus far the physical obligations of marriage had appeared to Henrietta tiresome and inconveniently gross; only to be tolerated with philosophy on account of other and solid advantages pertaining, for a woman, to the married state. It had pleased Providence to make mankind that way. She acquiesced rather than approved, neatly raising her pretty eyebrows over it. But now the aspect of this singular and slightly unsavoury obligation altered surprisingly. For, as that chill column of air pressed against her, making the lace frills of her dressing-gown lift and shiver as in delicate fear, her flesh cried out for love. Passion awoke in her. Surely her decision

was already made? Was she not ready, eager, to stay with Charles Verity, to go with him whither he would? No joy could equal the joy of submission. Why, a thousand times why, had she not known her own heart, recognized the road to felicity, and told him so at once? Her own dullness exasperated her, fanning passion into flame.

Pushed by unreasoning impulse to show some token, send some message of surrender, she leaned out over the waist-high, ochre-stained parapet and, making a penthouse of her hands to shut off the overpowering brightness, strained her eyes in effort to obtain further sight of the now distant horsemen between the boles of the tamarind trees.

But already they had gone too far. While, in their stead, she beheld the advance guard of the procession of very miscellaneous vehicles, in which the European and semi-European population of Bhutpur performed their diurnal pilgrimage to the bluff, overlooking the slow flowing bistre-green river, known indifferently as Chandra Devas Fort and Scandal Point.

Henrietta drew back angry and dismayed. For this vision of Bhutpur, driving out according to established custom to eat the air, to gossip, and incidentally display a" "tations, cheap rivalries and spites, rushed her in" "ly back into the tyranny of ordinary social

For the moment the bottom came unc" "ly near falling out of her new-found idolatry and delight. She felt furious at being caught in so undignified a position. For, to put it plainly, could anything be much more vulgar than hanging out of the equivalent of a window, gazing in love-sick fashion after a man who didn't belong to you? She only hoped to goodness no one had recognized her!

But, as ill-luck would have it, the Miss Hobdays, in their pony-cart, were among the first to pass. Imogen looked up, her bold stare raking the house front. Less than three minutes ago she must have met Colonel Verity. The inference surely was only too obvious.

Mrs. Pereira's cheeks burned. Her eyes smarted with tears of mortification. Headache again seized on her, throbbing, darting, unmercifully. It was odious, as she told herself a perfectly odious misadventure. And those underbred Hobday girls, too, of all people !

She sought refuge in the well-cushioned reclining chair Aloysius and Josepha Maria had brought out on to the gallery at her request, quite exhausted by her many emotions and experiences. Her anger took a wide pettish sweep, involving even Charles Verity himself. Whether worshipful, whether adorable or not, he should really have managed things better, she thought. Having said what he had said, it was most unfair, inconsiderate, the wrong moment decidedly, to ride away and leave her to bear the brunt of the situation, alone and unsupported, thus.

BOOK V

THE TURN OF THE HOUR-GLASS



I

"HENRIETTA—oh, Henrietta, you is there! I's
 found you. They said you didn't want me 'cause
 you was ill. And it hurt me all inside. And I tried and
 tried to come in by both the doors, and they pevented
 me. And I fought Tulsi. And Nannie was cross and
 called me naughty, and I tried to bite her 'cause I wanted
 to find new ways of being naughty—dreadful new ways
 'cause she pevented me going to you. And I cried and
 screamed with crying. And Nannie took me out to drive
 all round by the Government stables, to see the gun-
 bullocks and the effalents 'cause she knows I like seeing
 the effalents. They're so enormous big and funny with
 their twisty trunks. And I shut my eyes up tight and
 wouldn't look at them. I didn't care about no effalents.
 I only cared about you, Henrietta, and 'bout finding
 new ways of being naughty to hurt Nannie and Tulsi,
 and 'Loysius 'cause he 'fered with my coming to you.
 And when we got home I petended I was too sleepy to walk,
 and Hussain carried me upstairs, and Nannie said, 'Lay
 Miss Damaris down on the couch.' And d'reckly Nannie
 went to take her bonnet off I jumped up and ran away
 through the nursery window—oh! tremendyous quick,
 and found you, oh! I found you, Henrietta. And you
 won't be ill any more and let them shut the doors?—You'll
 let me stay, 'cause I love you so dreadfully much and
 'cause you're so beautiful pretty and I want all the time
 to see you and"—with wrinkled nose and insinuating
 sniffings—"smell your darling cosy little smell."

Before which artless confession both of sin and of affection, European standards and conventions, as represented by station gossip at Bhutpur, sank into insignificance. For looking at that soft baby-face—great solemn eyes, drooping mouth, fierce little hooked beak—the man's face to which it bore such quaint yet vital resemblance, presented itself to Mrs. Pereira's memory with overpowering attraction once again. A certain recklessness entered into her, defiance of comment and of custom. Fretful anger and sense of injury vanished. Headache was forgotten. She sat up in her long chair and, holding out her arms, gathered this small human bundle of imagination, devotion, electric nervous energy on to her lap. And so doing, she laughed delicately as in the joy of self-surrender, in spirit giving herself to the father while clasping the child against her bosom in a sustained embrace.

"Henrietta, oh! Henrietta," Damaris murmured, blissful though startled, somewhat breathless and out of countenance. "Does you love me so very dreadful much?"

To which inquiry, Mrs. Pereira finding no immediate reply, the speaker added with embarrassing justness of logic:

"'Cause if you do, you can't never go away. You'll have to stay always, ever and ever, with me and the Commissioner Sahib."

"Ah! who can tell?" Mrs. Pereira murmured, not unaware, possibly, of being slightly out of countenance herself as the little girl nestled down within the curve of her arm amongst the cushions.

Calm followed, an indolence all-pervading and sweet, while magnificence of sunset flooded the gallery through the open arcade set high in the house front. Woman and child lay bathed in the rose-scarlet light, each soothed by nearness of the other to a brooding—also typically Oriental—a waking sleep, at once enervated and delicious, in

which all fret of conscious thought, conscious effort, were drowned in a fullness of physical content.

But only too soon, unwelcome as the voice of upbraiding conscience, Sarah Watson called from within the nursery :

" Damaris—Damaris, come here. Where are you, Miss Damaris ? "

The child stirred, nestled closer, burying her face in the soft fragrant crumple of silk and lace. Mrs. Pereira felt the little body stiffen, growing obstinate in refusal and resistance. Bending down, she kissed the half-hidden cheek ; thereby signing a pact—with the child, was it, or rather with herself ?

The call was repeated, this time upon a more troubled note. Whereupon Henrietta elected to answer, and that with an airy composure boding no good to the inquirer.

" You need not be agitated, Mrs. Watson. Damaris is perfectly safe. She is here with me."

As she spoke Mrs. Pereira turned her head ; and, still lying back indolently in the long chair, watched Watson step out on to the gallery. As the latter—her tall puritanical figure irradiated in highly incongruous, even as it might seem jeering, fashion, by those incandescent splendours of sunset—advanced, Henrietta's dislike passed from the passive to the active stage.

All along she had suspected Watson of unfriendliness—when, that is, she had happened to think about Watson at all. It would be much nicer, of course, were the woman more attentive and gracious ; but if little Damaris' nurse was a disagreeable person, well, a disagreeable person she was, and there was an end of it ! Better forget her existence. To-day, unfortunately, with the master absent, the servant's position gained in importance, becoming a factor for comfort or discomfort no longer to be ignored. Mrs. Pereira did not propose to ignore it, inasmuch as she proposed to assert herself.

"It is time Miss Damaris came indoors to her tea, ma'am."

"Indeed it is more than time we both went indoors, I think," Henrietta returned sweetly. "But the poor child is very tired, Mrs. Watson. She tells me she has been crying. I thought it better, even at the risk of remaining out rather late, to let her stay here quietly and rest. I believe she has fallen asleep. But of course"—as the other stood rigid and silent—"if nursery discipline demands it——"

With her disengaged hand Henrietta gently stroked the child's cheek.

"Wake up, wake up, Damaris," she said. "Open those poor tired eyes. Your Nannie has come to fetch you."

But the little girl showed signs of mutiny.

"I won't wake up, Henrietta, 'cause I don't mean to go with Nannie.—Go away, Nannie, d'reckly please, and don't 'sturve me. I'm happy again with Henrietta. I won't eat no tea, thank you."

Mrs. Pereira turned sideways, slipping her feet off the leg-rest of the chair, and sat the child up on her lap. The two made a captivating picture in the glowing light.

"But this really becomes desperate, my pet," she said, in playful remonstrance. "We can't have you add starvation to tears. That would never do, would it, Nannie?"

And she glanced up, smiling at the waiting nurse. The familiarity of the last few words was calculated to wound and humiliate. Henrietta had an agreeable sense they did not fail of their purpose.

"Let us compromise," she went on gaily. "I am going to dine upstairs in my room, quite early. Miss Damaris can remain with me, and have her tea at the same time—then I fancy we shall find no difficulty in the way of eating. If you will kindly give the order, Mrs. Watson. My servants can bring her tea. That is a capital plan.—And—you can come for her at bed-time, you know, or send

Tulsi. Till then I am answerable for her. We will amuse one another,"—a pretty butterfly kiss, returned with ardour by the recipient—"won't we, Damaris?"

Mrs. Pereira was as good as her word. The little meal, the whole evening indeed, comprised a series of delights, till Damaris, joy going to her head, grew engagingly crazy as a kitten. Henrietta followed suit, or rather led the revels, quite forgetting to be or feel at all "grown up." So gamesome, indeed, was she, so full of charming frolic, that later Josepha Maria, squatting in conclave with the wife of Ismail Ali and other honourable matrons of the servants' quarters, bewailed and explained—with truly Oriental frankness in respect of physical fact—her mistress' childlessness.

"Alas that the Memsahib had not babes of her own! And to whom, then, the blame that she had not? For no barren woman, very surely, ever played as the Memsahib had played with the Missibaba to-night. Had not she"—the speaker—"been present? With her own eyes had she not seen and with her own ears heard? Verily to believe otherwise would be against nature. For is it not known to all that, in the barren, the juices of the mother-heart are dried up, so that of the baba-heart and its desires there is no comprehension? Nay, nay, it was without doubt some shameful deception in marriage the Memsahib had suffered. Let not these"—her present hearers—"judge otherwise. The blame lay elsewhere"—and with heaving of sighs, much rolling of upturned eyes, Josepha Maria sagely shook her sleek and sable head.

Certain it is that—whether owing to the still liquid conditions of the aforementioned juices or to some less recondite and material reason—a disquietingly sprightly and youthful grace still distinguished Henrietta Pereira, when, Damaris being at last restored to the care of nurse and ayah, at Lugard's request she granted him a few minutes' interview in the arched and vaulted corridor encircling the well of the hall, upon the first floor.

As she came out from her bed-chamber, the young man was astonished by her loveliness. Heretofore he had regarded her as he might some elegant modern portrait or statuette—an ultra-civilized *objet d'art*, agreeable to look on, but—happily—by no means moving. Now, a fact he registered with honest regret, she stirred his senses. What on earth had happened since he saw her this morning in the verandah? The quality of her prettiness had altered, softened, grown richer, more human, more—should he say—provocative or more sympathetic? Wasn't this possibly just the result of her change of costume—gracefully flowing garments in place of artificial fortifications of steel and whalebone, crinoline and corsets? For he found himself curiously eager to account for the phenomenon, both of her increased attraction and his own sensibility, on a rational, practical basis.

"I am awfully sorry to bother you so late, Mrs. Pereira," he said, unable for the life of him to keep admiration out of his eyes—"but Mrs. Watson's just told me you seemed better. And, as I am going my rounds of the house, I felt I should know for myself if there's anything I can do, anything you might want. Dr. McCabe's just looked in to see after Hockless. You'd not care, perhaps, to consult him, would you, yourself?"

"Oh dear no!" Henrietta declared.

The young man's constraint and glumness, on that very unsatisfactory expedition to the Mackinders' last night, was not forgotten. It still rankled. Henrietta did not intend the offender to escape chastisement. But whether to bring him to his knees by snubbing or by captivation, she had so far been undecided. In her present lively humour she was tempted to essay the latter method of reduction.

"Still, I appreciate your thoughtfulness in making the suggestion as to Dr. McCabe," she added, smiling upon him graciously. "It is very nice of you. But, indeed, professional advice is quite unnecessary. My indisposition

was a mere nothing—though I own I am a little tired still——”

She moved across the corridor, and sat down on a divan opposite—upholstered in faded orange and scarlet striped brocade, and running along the balustrade between the square piers of the archway.

“Just a passing headache and *malaise*. I had been a little worried.” She paused as, out of consideration for her hearer, resisting unpleasant memories. Then, sweetly courageous—“But Damaris has been with me, and exorcised my discomforts. Dear child, she is delightful company.—I only wish poor Mr. Hockless had as little need of a physician’s ministrations as I have.—By the way, tell me, how is he? I am ashamed to say I only realized the fact of his illness to-day.”

“Oh! he’s on the mend, thanks. But it’s been rather a squeak. Poor old Jimmy, so you hadn’t missed him?” he added, struck by the unconscious irony of her announcement.

Henrietta looked with a pretty effect of penitence.

“No, really,” she said, “at the risk of seeming reprehensibly unobservant, I am constrained to own I had not.”

“Poor old Jimmy!” Lugard repeated, this time thoughtfully, under his breath.

Fellow-feeling, in some degree, touched him. For to his own discomfort, he grew increasingly sensible of the attraction of her looks and manner, the grace of her attitude—her head and shoulders showing, in the quiet lamp-light, against the soft gloom filling the opening of the archway behind her. What she said amounted to nothing; but her way of saying it, and the fact that he was alone with her, gave every utterance a singular and, in a way, flattering value. Against his will Lugard began to comprehend why Jimmy Hockless had been so hopelessly bowled over—to understand how and why much stronger and more distinguished men than red-headed, inarticulate, unself-realized Jimmy might, very well, come to be bowled over

likewise.—There followed the question, had he, Lugard, been extraordinarily obtuse until now, or had she really been different—or simply hadn't she troubled to reveal her charm to him? He could not tell. He only knew that, as the minutes passed here and now—scrupulously honourable and decent-living fellow though he was—heady impulse to fling himself down on the divan, there, beside her, and make love to her, love barefaced and hot-blooded, arose in him, which it strained all his loyalty, all, indeed, his virtue, to resist. The sweat broke out on his forehead. What possessed him, he asked himself, to feel grossly, be tempted grossly thus? He rated himself for an ill-conditioned young beast; striving manfully meanwhile to steady his dancing nerves and fight down unlawful instincts.

Henrietta watched him with smiling and slightly malicious interest. She altered her position, leaned forward supported on her right arm straightened from the shoulder, the hand set, with extended fingers, upon the flat of the divan.

"Don't think me heartless," she protested. "Truly I am distressed about poor Mr. Hockless' illness, now I have heard of it. I am afraid it must have caused you anxiety and thrown a lot of extra work on you, which, by the way, perhaps explains certain—shall we call them?—lapses, that I confess I noted and found perplexing yesterday."

"You mean?" Lugard inquired, agitation gaining on him.

"That—well—you were not a conspicuously agreeable or interesting companion——"

"I—I'm——" the young man began, desperately, but paused. For, as he spoke, a draught, rising apparently from the depth of the hall far below, lifted the soft lace upon the shoulders and bosom of Mrs. Pereira's blue silk dressing-gown. The frills fluttered, shivered, as though endowed with independent life and volition, before sinking back into place.

This startled Maurice Lugard, impressing him strongly. He recalled his singular experience of last night—the lift and shiver of the cotton cloth curtain masking the door of Hockless' sick-room, in the long passage of the bachelors' quarters, and his apprehension of some malign, non-natural presence. Whereupon his brain cleared, his dancing nerves steadied perceptibly. The situation took on another complexion, was raised to a higher level, the spiritual and religious elements in him roused to timely fight. So that, with a fine inward movement alike of thankfulness and of repulsion, he was able to kick the rebellious flesh, the affections and lusts of it, back into place.

" 'I—I'm——?' " Mrs. Pereira quoted teasingly. " My dear Mr. Lugard, pray finish your little speech. It promised to be a pleasing *amende honorable*, receiving which I shall most gladly declare peace."

But Maurice took his time, having in great measure regained his nonchalance. He stood before Mrs. Pereira, bland, courteous, and, once again, impervious, though his heart, it must be conceded, still beat somewhat quick.

" Ah! the apology," he said, " the generously-promised declaration of peace?—Forgive me if I was doltish. It was my very eagerness to be pleasing which made me clumsy and tongue-tied, of course. In the fear of boring you by talking too much, I fell into the opposite error. How indeed could I help myself?—But don't let me add to my infelicities of conduct by occupying an undue amount of your time now. I was bound to assure myself you were better, to learn if there was anything I could do for you.—And I had to tell you, too, that, with your permission, I've given instructions to your servant. Aloysius sleeps here, on the corridor, across your doorway, for the next few nights."

Henrietta was sensible of his change of tone, sensible of that recovered imperviousness. It vexed her.

"You take your responsibilities very seriously, Mr. Lugard," she remarked.

"I carry out the Commissioner's orders," he returned, stiffening somewhat. "He thinks of everything, provides for everything. That's just where he is so wonderful."—The young man found it a tonic, it did him good, just now, to sing the praises of his chief.—"As a rule men with such large schemes and large ideas as his are weak on detail; but no detail is too small for him. That's why he's so strong, scores so heavily as an organizer and administrator. He leaves not so much as a grain of sand, as the hind leg of a fly, if you'll believe me, to chance. You've to be associated with him daily, as I've the luck to be, if you're to know the immense output and the thoroughness of his work. Ah! I tell you, he doesn't spare himself!"

Henrietta flushed and lowered her glance.

"Colonel Verity and I are very old friends. It is a real satisfaction to me to feel he has someone here who admires him as sincerely as you do."

"Oh! he's great," Lugard declared; "nothing short of great. And therefore it's all the more exasperating when what's trivial, some twopenny-halfpenny consequence of other people's blunders and idiotcies, wastes his time, and comes between him and the serious things of his life."

"As for instance?" Mrs. Pereira inquired, her eyes still downcast.

Maurice would have enjoyed answering "you"—simply, brutally, leaving it at that. But such luxury of truth-telling being, by every law of courtesy and chivalry, clearly forbidden, he let the question pass.

"This journey to Kankarpur," Henrietta asked, after a moment—"is it a case in point?"

"In a sense, yes. Poor Clatworthy acted like—like an ass, Mrs. Pereira—though it's mortally unlovely to speak evil of the dead. But it may prove to be a nasty business. The chief felt he must lay hold of it himself. He couldn't

very well depute his authority. A thousand to one there'd have been some muddle."

Henrietta raised her head, looking him in the eyes. Her features sharpened.

"Does he run any risks? Is he likely to be in any danger?"

"He himself swears not. All the same, I'd have given a year's pay to go with him."

"Then, pray, why did you not go?"

Lugard's expression became confidential, full of a sweet reasonableness.

"Hockless is out of commission, you see—more's the pity. And the Sultan-i-bagh, and the contents of it, couldn't very well be left without a watchdog of some sort."

"On Damaris' account, you mean? I understand; of course not," Henrietta said.

"In the Commissioner's absence, the nursery is usually moved over to Mrs. Mackinder's. They're awfully fond of Damaris there."

Mrs. Pereira rose from her place on the divan.

—No, she wasn't really so lovely, after all, Lugard told himself. Nor was she so young. Her face was hard, there was no denying that. But then, hadn't he himself been rather extensively hard—though after a different fashion? Had she seen it, he wondered? Had the implication gone home?—it was pretty bald, when he came to think of it—and what would be the upshot?

But Henrietta had sufficient diplomacy to remain, superficially, beneficent.

"Ah, this wretched headache!" she said. "I have talked long enough. It begins to be troublesome again. By all means give what orders you please to Aloysius. I'm so glad poor Mr. Hockless is mending. Good-night."

And she crossed the corridor, and entered her room, while the Goanese boy, hastening forward, all wide-smiling bows, closed the door behind her.

II

SUBJUGATION by captivation had failed—of this Mrs. Pereira was irritably conscious. Yet, once in bed, she very wisely determined to dismiss all thought of the events and perturbations of the past day. Tomorrow she could examine them at her leisure. Now it was her first duty to sleep—and sleep. She owed it to her slightly jangled nerves, to the preservation of her good looks, to her somewhat luxurious appreciation of bodily comfort and repose, to do so. Since Aloysius guarded her door without, she could dispense with Josepha Maria's more immediate protection. She therefore banished the good creature; who, after ceremonial lamentations, hastened, inwardly enchanted, to a positive debauch of gossip with the wife of Ismail Ali and other ladies of the servants' quarters.

Till well on into the small hours, when vitality runs low and imagination is prone to run riot, Henrietta succeeded in carrying out her restorative programme. Then accident played a nasty trick on her. For something gave with a wheezing snap, startling her awake to see a widening line of yellowish light cross the floor and climb her pillow.

At first she fancied herself back in her own house at Delhi—expected the line of light, evidently from a door ajar, to widen yet further; and, upon the bright pathway thus disclosed, to behold, not radiant angel shapes ascending or descending, but rather the plump form and florid

countenance of Johnnie Pereira, returning, largely, sentimentally affectionate, from over-copious potations at the club.

Henrietta sat up preparing remonstrance and rebuke ; for really it was very much too bad of him to disturb her at this unearthly time of night ! Then remembered where she was ; recognized that the door of little Damaris Verity's day nursery, not that of John Pereira's dressing-room, had snapped ajar. Remembered, too, while a hot flush ran over her whole body, that it was open to her to renounce the society of that honestly adoring, though bibulously disposed, warrior altogether, to give him, and the solemn vows she had made him, once and for all, the slip.

For a moment these varied and embarrassing recollections held her as in a vice, literally taking away her breath. She turned angry, peevish. Pereira, even if slightly in his cups, would of the two really be less tormenting—for then, at least, he would be clearly in the wrong, she herself in the right ; and it annoyed her frightfully to be otherwise than in the right.

"To-morrow," she said, half aloud, "to-morrow. I really can't think about it all now. It's too complicated. I am too exhausted. That detestable door to start open ! I suppose Damaris tampered with it in her efforts to find me, poor child. But that it should disturb me to-night, of all nights "

She tried to compose herself. Straightened the pillows, proposing to curl down again and invite sleep, when a voice from behind the enemy door caught her ear, speaking—or reading was it ?—in whispering undertones.

The sound was alarming, very ghostly, heard thus in the thick nocturnal quiet. Henrietta listened in growing agitation. At last she understood. Surely the voice was Watson's ; not reading, but praying. Henrietta had a moment of extreme impatience. For prayer, offered at unauthorized hours by unauthorized persons, offended her

sense of fitness, offended, perhaps, her inherent egoism. She felt it was bad taste, the stealing of a march on less gluttonously pious persons, thus privately to besiege the Throne of Grace—an inconsiderate and exaggerated fashion of behaving which she had a perfect right to inquire into and—if she could—suppress.

So, fortified by disapproval, she ventured out of bed, put on her slippers; and, holding up her trailing night dress in front to avoid risk of a stumble, made her way resolutely across the room, beside, but not along, the pathway of light, determined to investigate.

At the table in the middle of the day nursery sure enough Sarah Watson knelt, her thin, large-jointed hands clasped upon her open Bible. The table was bare save for a lamp, the light of which fell starkly upon her upturned face—the closed eyelids, sallow cheeks and insignificant features distorted, puffy and swollen from weeping. She still wore her black silk apron and plain grey cotton gown, which fell straight from the waist, in limp folds, covering her feet.

To Henrietta, from her station in the shadow by the partly open door, the kneeling figure appeared odiously depressing in its meagre severity of outline. The more so, perhaps, because it suggested an unyielding, obdurate quality by no means easy to negotiate. She hesitated, turning timid, uncertain exactly how and when to declare herself. And, while she hesitated, Watson's voice became louder, rising in the fervour of supplication.

"As if two husbands wasn't enough, oh! Lord—two of them already for such a mincing pink and white slip of pretension!—but she must journey here with all her worldly finery and airs and graces to steal the child's love from me and spread nets to catch the father too, and make him her fancy man. Oh! Lord have mercy. Turn away shame and sin from this house and those that dwell in it. Show her in her true colours, oh, Lord, and send her back from where she came! Hasn't she done

harm enough already—driving the poor, silly boy, too, off his head with her wiles."

Her forehead bowed down on her clasped hands; but only for an instant, then her face, with its closed eyes, was upturned again in the lamplight.

"Spare the father, oh, Lord!" she prayed. "Have mercy, spare the child. Send help from above. Hear Lord. Save, or we perish. Lord, have you not chastened me, has not your hand been heavy upon me? You took those that were mine, and left me a widow and childless, alone in a wicked heathen land stricken with war. I believed you gave me these others, to serve and to care for, in the greatness of your mercy to heal my wounds and comfort my sorrow. Must they be taken too? Have I wronged them; have I been unfaithful or neglectful? Or have I loved them too much, making idols of them, giving the worship to them due alone to God? And is her coming, this dressed-up, wanton, fine lady, my punishment? Have mercy, oh, Lord! have mercy even though I have sinned, for jealousy is cruel as the grave—the grave in which I laid my dead, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, seven years ago in bloody Lucknow. Lord, it is enough. Stay Thy hand lest my faith fail, lest I am among the backsliders whose souls scorch for ever in the torment of hell. Hear me, oh, Lord, give me strength to overcome, strength to endure. But send her back, in mercy send her back to this second man she calls husband, before she devours my foster-child's love or my master's good name. To those that have shall be given, but not to her, oh, Lord, not to her! Jealousy burns me with a great flame. Drive her out, oh, Lord, from among us; unmask her deceit. Make her go—oh, Lord, I beseech thee—make her go."

At first the words conveyed no definite meaning; but as they rolled on, pleading, reproaching, accusing, the semi-biblical phrases shaped themselves in threatening pictures, before which Mrs. Pereira's selfish annoyance and

light-hearted optimism alike fell prone. So that, when at last realizing that she herself was the object of these bitter denunciations, she had nothing, not even wounded vanity, upon which to fall back. She was stripped and dumb before the storm, scared to the very marrow of her delicate bones, and utterly undone.

Trembling, she shut the door, obliterating the bright pathway of lamplight, bolted it on the inside; and fled back to bed in the greyness, which now marked the squares of the slatted-shuttered windows, coldly heralding the dawn.

III

LUGARD was tired after a day of many comings and goings, a heavy post-bag thrown in. A Settlement Officer had arrived unexpectedly from one District, an Assistant Commissioner from another, both eager to consult Colonel Verity on matters of local importance. Neither was best pleased at finding him absent and their journey vain. The news of Clatworthy's murder had spread, too, in the swift, unaccountable fashion common to India; and Lugard was pestered by inquiries, both from the Cantonments and Civil Lines, with which it was difficult to fence.

Mrs. Pereira had been invisible—to his thankfulness. Not that he could have danced attendance on her even had she so desired, for, till late afternoon, his time was full, full up. He learned she had sent a request for the carriage at a surprisingly early hour, and had driven out alone, before the sun gained power. Of her doings he knew no more than this; save that she had declared herself "perfectly well" in reply to a message asking after her health.

Now, rid at last of his official duties, he longed to rest his brain and refresh his body by a set of squash racquets at the club; but there was Hockless to be thought of—Hockless so far restored, that, propped up with cushions, he lay on a charpoy set in the shade of the Eastern verandah just outside the windows of his room. Lugard would undoubtedly have preferred squash racquets to his

co-secretary's society at this juncture, yet the latter piqued his curiosity to a considerable extent.

For the last thirty-six hours Hockless' temperature had been down to normal. He was making a record recovery in fact; and already displayed all the crossness of a good convalescence. But, as he gained in health, the impassioned and tragic being of the night before last very queerly gave place to the commonplace young Englishman of earlier experience. It really took nothing short, as Lugard philosophically reflected, of delirium and dissolution imminent to awaken that torpid and limited individuality to fullness of life. He observed Jimmy's re-transformation with a return of amused superiority. The Ethiopian—or rather Anglo-Saxon—hadn't really changed his skin, nor the leopard its spots. In truth there wasn't, never had been, any lithe, flashing leopard at all; but only the good, rusty, fusty, puzzle-headed old British lion, as depicted on a thousand and one swinging tavern signs from the Channel to the Tweed. The homely beast was restored to him—Lugard—as official associate, safe enough. Only—the young man lay back in his colonial chair, with meditative eyes, and smoked—wasn't there a question ahead of that congenitally puzzle-headed quadruped calculated vitally to increase its bewilderment? For what did Colonel Verity propose to do about the ugly scene of two evenings back? Were not Hockless' days at the Sultan-i-bagh numbered? Wasn't he—vulgarily speaking—going to be given the boot?

The subject of his meditations here broke into querulous speech.

"I assure you, if you'd only believe me, Lugard, I'm perfectly all right. And I tell you I shall come in to dinner to-night."

"Stow it, my dear chap, stow it," the other returned, good-naturedly. "You know just as well as I do you can't. Why, you're barely able to walk. Your legs double up like so much wet string."

"But I tell you I can, and what's more I shall. I am dead sick of all this coddling and baby-food fuss. If it goes on much longer I believe I shall cut my throat. McCabe? For goodness sake don't jaw me about McCabe. Time-serving old fraud! He'd say any mortal thing to curry favour with Verity, specially if it was likely to keep me back and lengthen his beastly bill."

Hockless turned his head fretfully upon the pillows.

"In my opinion there's been something fishy about this illness of mine all along," he went on; "which I don't half like. I'm not so dense as some of you people find it convenient to think me, and I spotted something underhand from the first. You're hopelessly weak where the chief's concerned, you know. He leads you by the nose. You've no will of your own; and, though it's a rough thing to say, precious little conscience either."

Lugard yawned, and made a show of studying the cartoon in a three months' old *Punch* lying on a cane table near him.

"Haven't I though?" he said. "I wonder! All the same, continue, oh, continue, Jimmy my son. Information about one's modest self is always interesting."

"I should have supposed that depended a good deal on the sort of information it was," Hockless retorted with attempted sarcasm.

"Not at all. The interest is there just the same, even when the information given provokes a gay desire to punch the giver's head. You're not a close thinker, you know, Jimmy—never have been to my knowledge, since the day your rare and radiant countenance first cleared my skyline. Pity, since it leads you into palpable error at times—but you ain't."

"Hang, close thinking," Hockless returned sulkily. "I know what I see jolly plain; and what I see through, which is more to the point."

"And you see through me, eh?" Lugard remarked, yawning again and stretching himself.

"Oh! I don't say how far you lent yourself to a job; but it's nonsense to pretend you haven't observed how awfully short Verity was with me yesterday before he left. His manner made me feel confoundedly cut up. What earthly right has he to be insolent? I'm every bit as well born as he is. I know he's my official superior and all that, of course; and I'm perfectly willing to give him the respect due to his rank. But his rank doesn't justify insult. You might suppose I was a criminal, instead of a sick man who couldn't lift a finger to help himself. I call it simply inhuman to behave to a fellow like that, when he's at such beastly disadvantage. Does he suppose I started this confounded fever for my own amusement?"

The position became slightly awkward. What to say, and what not to say? Should he give Jimmy a hint? Wherefore Lugard made play with his pipe, which did not draw satisfactorily. Took it out of his mouth, and, leaning sideways, tapped the bowl of it against the plastered wall. A cone of glowing ash fell to the ground on which he set his heel. No—hints had better wait till he could gauge Hockless' attitude of mind more accurately.

"Not an altogether lucid statement," he said. "Yet I think in the main I follow it. So fire away, fire away, my dear chap. Don't consider my feelings. I've had one night's sleep in three all for your sweet sake, and put your work through in addition to my own by day. Still, I don't grudge you your grumble. Have it out by all means, and then perhaps you'll feel easier. Pitch into the whole lot of us like blazes if it'll help to relieve your spleen."

And he fell to scraping the inside of the pipe-bowl, gingerly, with his pen-knife.

"It's all very well to try to shove the subject aside like that"—Hockless drew himself up feebly into a half sitting posture. "But I tell you I'm in dead earnest. I feel I have been badly put upon, and there's a lot which

requires explanation. I'm not so much rubbish, after all, to be pitchforked aside anyhow. There's been some hanky-panky going on, and I was determined to let you know I'd jolly well spotted it just as soon as I could pull myself together. For I've been awfully miserable, Lugard. And when I asked Buddhu what day of the week it was this morning, I found I was out of my count. There's a day and night I can't remember one blessed thing about, except a—a horrible feeling of Verity sitting and glaring at me. I seem to have clean lost twenty-four hours."

"Well, I wouldn't bother to look for them, not just yet, anyhow," Lugard returned, refilling the now clean pipe. "They'll turn up all in good time, I imagine—sooner perhaps than you quite care to have them."

"What do you mean?" Hockless asked suspiciously.

"What I say—'only this and nothing more,' like the poet's raven. Cheer up, Jimmy. Don't fret about your lost twenty-four hours. You've plenty in store to make up for them. Why you must have the constitution of an ox to pull round so quickly."

"Of course I have. I always said so. Didn't I tell you I was all right, if only you people would give up all the beastly coddling? I could dine with you—you—and—Come in to dinner I mean, perfectly well to-night. —Only the thought of Verity's glaring like that haunts me. I can't forget it. For what had I, after all? Nothing except get fever like anybody. It isn't a crime to be ill, is it? And when you're as down as I was, it takes every scrap of pluck out of you to feel you're under a cloud, that people have turned against you, that there's not a soul you can trust—everyone's playing fast and loose with you——"

He checked himself, a cluck in his throat and his red-rimmed, fever-sunk eyes fixed.

"Poor old chap," Lugard murmured soothingly, mistaking the cause of the abrupt cessation of speech.—Really he was pathetic, this poor puzzle-headed British

lion, with his grievances and conviction of ill usage!—Then following the fixed glance of those same fever-sunken eyes—"The deuce, that's still the ticket, is it!" Lugard murmured under his breath, and fell to the business of lighting his refilled pipe with rather studied deliberation.

Fine transparent shadow already covered the ground levels of the great garden. Rising from out it the trees whether massed or standing singly, were, some topped, others gilded for half their height, by still sunshine. From the far end of the central alley, between beds of straggling Bengal roses, Mrs. Pereira walked slowly towards the house, bareheaded, a white-covered, pink-lined parasol tipped over her shoulder. The lower flounce of her pink and lilac-flowered muslin gown skimmed the surface of the pathway, raising tiny whorls of dust. To this apparently she was indifferent, moving forward mechanically, lost in thought.

Over the wide lawn on the left, Damaris sported—agile and slender in her short white frock—bowling a scarlet ball for Jessie, the fox terrier, to retrieve, and inciting that staid and corpulent animal to livelier exertion by clapping of hands and spurts of pretty laughter. Tulsi, yellow-robed, meekly patient, attended her bearing dolls; while Hussain and Aloysius, in close confabulation, loaded with folding chairs, rugs, books and cushions brought up the rear.

The effect of those three delicate feminine figures seen amid the extravagant luxuriance of the garden, in the evening suavity and fragrance—the violence of day's scorch and glare over, the violence of barbaric subject populations securely walled out—was instinct with charm and with appeal. It affected both the young men, taking their ease within the shelter of the pillared verandah; but affected them with notably different result.

For Maurice Lugard—still smarting from the discovery that he had taken service under Sir Lancelot rather than Sir Galahad, smarting too from the shame of hardly

resisted fleshly temptation during his singular interv. w with Mrs. Pereira last night—hardened in self-protective distrust. An ascetic vein, latent in his nature, declared itself. He suffered the charm, was sensitive to the appeal, yet repudiated both. To his seeing they were enervating, perilous. He went a step further, growing, for the moment, fanatical. He could have found it in his heart to wish—as many a man, far from ignoble, has probably, at moments, found it in his heart to wish before and since—that the Almighty had seen fit to leave women out of the scheme of creation and manage the whole affair of her office and function some other way. For, she non-existent, how comparatively straightforward, sane and unvexed man's earthly course would be!—As source of inspiration, prize of battle, vehicle of unnumbered and unnameable delights?—Oh! yes, no doubt; if, declining on sentiment, you choose to turn your back on fact. For, didn't she, as a simple matter of history, more often deflect from splendid purposes than promote them, hopelessly confuse moral issues, falsify ideals, debauch heroic natures, remorselessly make hay of careers and reputations, but for her corroding influence, also heroic?

He looked at Henrietta Pereira, tasteful, expensive, deliciously elegant, strolling houseward up the straight rose-bordered alley. Undeniably she represented romance and poetry of a kind—the drawing-room, ball-room, conservatory kind—There he closed the door, so to speak, following the pleasures she might offer no further, for chastity's sake.—He thought of Charles Verity, riding northward, under the swinging constellations, through the eager chill of the spring night, to poor dead Clatworthy's bungalow in smooth-spoken, murder-stained Kankarpur, determination of stern justice in his soul.—There was poetry and romance of another order, masculine and terrible, allied to eternal laws both of Nature and of the governance of God. He—Lugard—had wanted, wanted so very badly to take a hand in that beautiful, grim,

retributive job! And to be held up here—to come within an ace of making a beast of himself, moreover—by this stray piece of female loveliness, this intrusive other man's wife woman, instead! It was degrading. His gorge rose at it. Chivalry wore thin to the point of his finding himself—for the time being—a convinced misogynist. His condemnation swept the board with youthful intemperance of generalization. For, actually, when you came to think of it, did not even light-foot baby Damaris, frisking so blithely over the lawn with the portly old dog, spell potential desperation and disaster to heaven alone knew how many promising young gentlemen—male innocents, already doomed though barely breeched as yet?

Here Hockless' voice, shaken by mingled weakness and emotion, struck in, queerly incongruous, across his thought.

"I say, Lu-lu, tell me, there's a good fellow, am I presentable? I did have a shave this morning. I do look fairly decent in these flannels, don't I?"

With trembling hands he tried to smooth down his shock of reddish hair—bristling and harsh with fever—and button the collarband of his soft shirt.

"I wish to goodness I'd put on a tie," he continued plaintively. "But that's just of a piece with all the rest of my rotten luck.—Look here, Lugard, I'm speaking to you. Have you gone deaf? Don't you hear what I say?—if you do, you really might have the ordinary civility to answer."

Maurice, his mind still occupied with the inimical influence and quite superfluous existence of the entire human female sex, responded but absently to his companion's anxieties of the toilet.

"What? Presentable? Oh, you?" he said.

Then enjoyment of badgering the slow-brained Anglo-Saxon over-riding inclination to philosophize:

"But to be perfectly candid, since you ask me, my dear fellow, perhaps you are a bit off colour this afternoon. I must own I've seen you look more princely, nearer the

Solomon-in-all-his-glory style. Those flannels, for one thing, have outlived their pristine innocence. But never mind. I can bear up, since it's his inner worth rather than his—slightly intermittent—outward sparkle which binds me captive to my peerless James."

He rose, stretching again lazily, while his thoughts, changing their venue, ran at Charles Verity's stirrup along the dusty high-road and through the sweltering bazaar of Kankarpur.—Yes, in good truth, he greatly loved living Sir Lancelot! Yet his spiritual sense, the secret places of his soul, bewailed, and would continue to bewail, the lost Sir Galahad.

"The devil's own plague on pretty women!" he said bitterly, under his breath.

Meanwhile Hockless grumbled:

"I wish to goodness you'd stop your everlasting chaff, Lugard. It gets on one's nerves; besides, it's such bad form, this perpetual rotting. You've altogether too high an opinion of your own wit, and it's liable to jar on other people."

Whereupon, desiring further to enforce respect and assert personal dignity, the speaker sat up, and screwing himself round put his feet down over the wooden side-frame of the charpoy. He made an effort to stand, but with limited success.

"Dash it all, how beastly weak I am!" he lamented. "I made certain I could walk, but I feel like pitching over on my head. It's no good. I must give in."

And he collapsed, backwards.

Lugard laid down his pipe, came close, and, stooping, lifted the dangling legs on to the mattress; then, taking Hockless under the arm-pits, drew him gently up against the pillows.

"Poor old Jimmy, poor dear old chap," he said. "Don't be huffy. I meant no harm. I tell you it's been touch and go whether we brought you through or not. And we all did our best—even my hairy compatriot McCabe

even the chief, though you do fall foul of him just at present.—I fancy you'll come to think differently about all that.—But no man can be as near scuppered as you've been, and get well in a minute. So don't fret. Give yourself a couple more days, and I'll back you to feel as fresh as paint."

Hockless turned his face away.

"In less than a couple of days Verity will be home," he said. "And then—then it'll be too late."

"Too late for what?" Lugard demanded, surprised into sudden heat.

"Too late to—Look!" Hockless cried, raising himself on his right elbow; "there's Mother Mackinder coming round on to the lawn and Mrs.—Mrs. Pereira's going to meet her. Then she won't pass into the house this way, and I shan't have a chance of speaking to her after all!"

He put his left hand over his eyes; and Lugard, touched whether he would or not, saw the tears run down the side of his nose and dribble piteously over his lips and chin.

"Don't look at me, Lu-lu," he said—"don't look. I know I am making a fool of myself. But I can't help it. I'm so awfully disappointed—and I can't forget the beastly scare I had at Scandal Point, about the cliff, the evening I was going under with fever. Don't chaff me. I can't stand it. I know you think me a blasted idiot. But you're not made like me. You don't understand—how should you, when you're as cold as a fish."

Lugard moved a step or two away, ramming his fists down into his trousers pockets. He was curiously angry, hurt. He stood at the edge of the verandah, under the centre arch, where a flight of shallow steps led down to the garden. A cloying sweetness reached him from the orange grove, mingling with the scent of jasmine, frangipani and champak close at hand. He heard the pert cries of homing parrots; the creak of the pulleys and gearing at the well-head, chanting song of the well-coolie to his bullocks—their necks bent beneath the wooden yoke—

and splash and gurgle of water-skins emptying into the irrigating conduit; the short gasping bark of the stout fox terrier chasing Damaris' scarlet ball and the pleasant well-bred voices of the two Englishwomen in animated conversation.

"Further information about my modest self," he said. "True or false—which, I wonder? For upon my soul, I'm not sure myself? At?"

That business of last night, upon the corridor, in the quiet lamplight—his own sensations, his own unruly emotion—reconstructed itself. Didn't it very effectually give the lie to Hockless' accusation of his being as cold as a fish?

But suddenly he backed away into the verandah.

"By George, more visitors—nothing less than our forthcoming Imogen Hobday," he said. "I am out of this, Jimmy. She'll want to hold my hand—or yours—or both. 'm going to take covert. Anything I can do for you, my son, before I scoot?"

"Yes, call Buddhu, please," Hockless answered chokingly, "and help him get me back to bed."

IV

WHEN Mrs. Mackinder made up her mind to take action her methods were direct and simple. She neither hesitated nor havered but went straight to the point. Hence her advent at the Sultan-i-bagh, so disconcerting to love-sick Hockless.

The tone at her dinner-party, in all suggested rather than actually said, had not pleased her. Conversation during the cricket tournament in the grounds of the club, this afternoon, pleased her still less. Even the excitement produced by rumours of the young Deputy Assistant Collector's violent death, soon merged in speculative gossip and innuendo concerning what Colonel Waterhouse described, with a chuckle, as the "mystery of the Summer Palace." Just simply human nature this—since is it not far more entertaining to gibbet the living than mourn the dead?—Yet, however natural the tendency, or agreeable the pastime, Mrs. Mackinder determined to combat it for the good both of individuals and of the community.

"The Station is getting disgracefully out of hand," she told her calm and courtly Judge, as the barouche turned out of the club grounds into the shade of the avenue. "The women are showing off their virtue by throwing mud; and you men are showing off your knowledge of the world by making eyes and licking your lips. This plague of self-righteousness and gay-dogginess must be stayed. It's bad for everybody—the more so because it's mainly a fraud. The women aren't one quarter as good, nor are you men half as wicked as you like to imagine yourselves."

"For such concession much thanks," he replied, smiling comfortably at her.

Husband and wife were on terms of excellent friendship, the acuter raptures and irritations of early married life alike safely traversed, steady levels of mutual esteem and confidence securely embarked on. They knew the best and worst of one another, and the bond still held. Their elder boy was distinguishing himself at Cambridge, the younger doing well at Winchester. Their only daughter had married an able young civilian, the Bombay side, early last year. All went well. Nor did Mrs. Mackinder forget those difficult years when duty to husband in India, and children in England, clashed. He and she agreed the claim of the children was, morally, the stronger. But the wife's heart held a great tenderness towards the husband who, though by no means unattractive in the sight of women, had been faithful to her through long periods of absence. Gratitude put a halo, in her eyes, round his head; although, to the world at large, she might seem to rule him with a certain masterfulness.

"And is it permitted to inquire how you propose to extinguish the existing outbreak of this secular and permanently recurrent epidemic?" he inquired, still smiling.

"First I will drop you at home."

"That is welcome news, in any case."

"Drive on to the Sultan-i-bagh, and invite little Mrs. Pereira to dinner—bring her back with me, if I can manage to. The Commissioner's absence gives sufficient excuse for an informal invitation; and her dining with us quietly, *en famille*, will show we are on perfectly good terms and so discountenance the worst of the gossip."

Mrs. Mackinder settled herself back on the broad seat of the swaying barouche. Her mouth was firm, but a point of humour twitched its left corner.

"After dinner," she said, "I shall talk to Mrs. Pereira."

"Always supposing your victim proves docile, and

shows a disposition to yield herself a willing sacrifice *pro bono publico*."

"She will listen. In her own interests she will listen," Mrs. Mackinder asserted confidently. "She is clever enough and worldly enough—unless I am much mistaken—to be very chary of making further false steps when the danger is once pointed out to her. She has more head than heart—like most of those little Dresden-shepherdess women you men are so fond of flirting with—and in a conflict between the two, head will carry the day. To it I shall appeal—omitting to mention that I speak entirely for the sake of the Station and of the Commissioner."

"On those points a degree of reticence should be maintained, I agree," he said, looking at her slyly, with affectionate amusement, "or you may happen to defeat your own praiseworthy purposes. But, anyhow, you have my blessing. I earnestly wish you success. I also, my love, earnestly entreat you to stick to your programme—namely, that of dropping me at home before you open the campaign, and giving me sufficient time to seek refuge in the recesses of my own study before delivering your final onslaught. I have not the faintest wish to assist when you give her a wiggling, though the strongest—within becoming limits—to make eyes at our very pretty guest during dinner."

Here the conversation passed to other subjects, the news from Kankarpur and fears of underlying native hostility and unrest among them. Yet, in point of fact, that projected "wiggling" was not destined to be administered after all by Mrs. Mackinder; but by quite another person—upon whose devoted head, let it be added, it eventually rebounded with lamentably dramatic results.

Meanwhile, in the interests of lucidity, some mention must be made of Henrietta Pereira's proceedings during the earlier hours of the day in question.

Sleep had proved impossible of acquisition after finding

herself the object of Mrs. Watson's sincere, though somewhat sulphurous, petitions. Hence she rose early; and immediately after her little first breakfast, drove out—Aloysius upon the box by the coachman, a bare-legged groom, with flying pugree running alongside the horses on either hand—to Chandra Devas Fort, in the morning freshness. Lighting down from the carriage, she walked to the angle of the crumbling bastion; and stood gazing absently at the vast prospect intersected by the low sandy banks and bistre-green waters of the river, and flanked to westward, along the border of the waste land, by groves and orchards, the blood-red walls, flat roofs, minarets and squat carven steeples of the native city.

The limpidity of the air, at this hour, was extreme, all objects showing in high relief and definiteness of outline. Across the warm pallor of the Maidan flocks of goats and herds of cattle streamed, in long lines, out to pasture. Horses, small and neat as toys, were being exercised. In the far distance, fronting the Cantonments, toy soldiers drilled and marched. There was life in the scene, and movement; yet—save for the stationary carriage and waiting servants—the solitude immediately surrounding Henrietta was impressively complete. So complete, indeed, that it endangered her usually active consciousness of individuality, and paralysed her capacity of thought. She doubted whether she had not been foolish to come; whether she would not have known her own mind and regulated her perturbing sensations—for, in good truth, she was very much upset—more successfully with four enclosing walls about her and a solid roof over her head. But, then, she had needed so imperatively to get away from the neighbourhood of Damaris' day nursery, and of its ruling spirit, "that horrid woman, Watson" and her insufferably indelicate supplications and prayers!

These last filled her with semi-superstitious alarm. For

none more than the light-minded and unreligious really fear God—fear His activity, His intrusion on the schemes, the junketings and jollities of their agreeably mundane existence. To Henrietta, as to hundreds of her class and generation, religious exercises and sentiment were, practically, limited to the social obligation of church-going on Sunday; restrictions of speech and attitude, imposed during the ceremony, in great degree compensated for by the wearing of best clothes, criticism—usually adverse—of the best clothes of others, and agreement, amid effervescence of released conversation, the sacred precincts once quitted, regarding the “deplorable dullness of poor Mr. So-and-So’s sermon.” This being Henrietta’s normal relation to the Things of the Spirit, the measure of her impulse towards the Absolute and Eternal, it is hardly surprising that a living faith and fervent expression of it should arouse in her active distrust and dismay.

Even now, looking out over the vast and vivid scene in the invigorating morning atmosphere, distrust and dismay possessed her still. What if those crude, denunciatory prayers should take effect, should be answered? What if Providence, taking sides with the supplicant, adopting her really very unjust and inadequate view of the situation, should display open hostility, find arbitrary means of rushing her—Henrietta—back into the arms of her lawful and semi-deserted spouse? The idea suggested the most odious and humiliating possibilities; rendered none the less humiliating by the fact that only indirectly was she responsible for the said situation. Honestly she had only desired friendship—tinged with sentiment, perhaps, but of that the less the better. Intrigue had been forced upon her. But how prove this? She recognized appearances were sadly against her. Hence not only was she shocked and frightened, but outraged at the insult put upon her by—and here was the nastiest stab of all!—this woman of a rank and education so far inferior to her own. The position was hopelessly vul-

garized by the intervention of this uncultivated mind and its narrow religious and moral prejudices. With one's equals it is comparatively easy to fence. They at least know the rules of the game. If we commit indiscretions, break laws even, let us at least be judged by our peers. But this attack from a lower social level, with religion as an ally, was an abominable business, indeed. Pride and vanity were alike hard bestead. Nor did the brilliant solitude now surrounding her afford comfort but rather the reverse. It was indifferent to her pretty person and perturbation, driving home a sense of her own insignificance, making her in her own eyes an object of slight importance, slight worth.

The value of her personal entity thus painfully diminished, it was inevitable that Henrietta should clutch rather wildly at the concrete, at flattering words actually spoken, flattering incidents which had actually taken place. To Charles Verity, in any case, her existence was not an insignificant fact, or she an object of small worth. Had he not offered to throw the result of years of labour, a great position, even social honour, to the winds for her sake? She cast her eyes on the certainty of his admiration, clinging to it as a life-belt for the saving of her self-love and self-respect. What did the opinion of her entertained by this ignorant, methodistical servant-woman matter as against his? Any comparison between the two was manifestly absurd.

Arrived at this point in her mental discussion, Henrietta felt distinctly more at ease. Began to preen her ruffled plumes, and turn her charming head from side to side, to breathe the clear air with conscious relish; relish, too, the dignities of well-appointed carriage, fine horses, and servants waiting attentive to her call. It was no light matter to be beloved of such a man as Charles Verity; beloved, as she now knew, through many years. She sheltered behind that knowledge—first erecting it as barrier between herself and possible answer to prayer on

the part of Providence ; and lastly, growing bolder, shaking the fact of it defiantly in Providence's very face.

So doing, her mind fixed on the strength, the force, the singular, compelling quality of the man who so loved her, a longing to renew her sensations of yesterday and voluptuous desire of surrender once more invaded her. Whether she would have the courage to accept his invitation to break with the old conditions of her life, and give her future to him wholly, she could not yet tell. Events, circumstances, must settle that. But that she must renew the interrupted intercourse of yesterday, must "give him a fair hearing"—she smiled at the sunlit plain, the bistre-green river, the blood-red walls of the seething native city, with a certain arch amusement as she put the matter thus—before giving a final answer, she was convinced.

Then, once more self-centred and elate, she signed to Aloysius to bring up the carriage, and mounting into it gave orders for return to the Sultan-i-bagh. Only—her thought now reverting to Damaris—it was incumbent upon her to see as much of that engaging child as possible ; withdraw her from Sa'ah Watson's objectionable influence, train her baby intelligence, poor little pet, in more natural, suitable and—she must add—ladylike directions.

V

THIS determined, if slightly artificial, buoyancy of outlook remained by Mrs. Pereira till midday. Then the arrival of the mail-bag materially altered the colour and substance of her thought.

For she learned that a high official, now making a tour of the North-West Provinces and Punjab, proposed to bestow the light of his countenance upon the civil and military garrison of Delhi, for the space of nearly a week. The object of the visit was political, a spectacular demonstration of the dignity and might of the English Raj in the former Moghul capital—a daring conception this, and one regarding which it had therefore been deemed wise to keep silence until close on the hour of fulfilment. Worthy reception and entertainment must be provided for him and for his suite; while, in addition to public functions and displays, private festivities must clearly grace the occasion on as extensive a scale as shortness of notice permitted.

And, in this connection, Henrietta's popularity became refreshingly evident. She received a batch of letters from her many friends, the burden of all being the same—namely, that on no account must she miss the exciting event.

"Simply we are lost without you," the wife of the Commanding Officer wrote. "You are shouted for to help organize a dance here, a luncheon there, theatricals somewhere else. Surely you have vegetated at that out-

of-the-way place, Bhutpur, long enough! You know I never believed very much in your indisposition. Home-worries—all we wretched married women have them—one's only consolation is unmarried women have quite as many, and far less amusing ones—were more to blame for your little breakdown, in my opinion, than real ill-health. But, well or ill, my dear, as you value my affection, come back and help me salaam to the big man with due effect." This and much more of the sort, which under ordinary circumstances would have been pre-eminently to Henrietta's taste. Even as it was, her eyes sparkled and her pretty fingers itched to have a share in preparation of, participation in, the show.

Her batch of letters also contained one from John Pereira, at sight and perusal of which her eyes sparkled and fingers itched to quite another tune. For the sprawling, rather illiterate handwriting struck her as suggestively shaky. Nor was the substance of the epistle calculated to allay suspicions engendered by its outer form. In it Pereira alternately whined and bounced, offering assurances of discretion in the present, protesting the existence of earnest amendment in the recent past; while mentioning, as his constant companions, certain persons more likely—Henrietta knew by disagreeable experience—to exploit than discourage his unhappy weakness in the matter of drink, cards, horses and general expensiveness. The text was starred, moreover, with terms of maudlin endearment which positively—no other expression adequately conveys her sensations—made Henrietta squirm.

Al' this threw her into fresh perturbation. Play hide-and-seek with the unwelcome conviction as she might, she knew beyond all question of doubt that, if she bade a final farewell to John Pereira, bad habits would increase on him with rapidly fatal result. It was idle to pretend—though it shamed her to admit the truth—that his death in itself would not cause her uncontrollable grief. But the manner of it might easily be of a less disgraceful

sort, less directly referable to herself. Nor could she disguise the fact that from all such official and social glorifications, as those now beckoning her alluringly from Delhi, she would be in future ruthlessly, irrevocably, shut out if that same farewell to Johnnie Pereira was actually and finally said.

Meanwhile, in accordance with her plan conceived on the drive home from Chandra Devas Fort, she spent much of the day in playing with and petting Damaris. So doing, she, at moments, suffered movements of passionate longing towards the father to whom the child bore so quaint a resemblance. Her suffering was real, at once enchanting and poignant. Henrietta had never imagined it was possible to feel so much! Pereira's letter added notably to her agitation under this head. For now, as on former occasions, exactly in proportion as the flabbiness of his character, his commonness and underbreeding came home to her, did the personality of Charles Verity gain in attraction, in distinction and compelling strength. It followed indirectly, that by late afternoon Damaris' childish devotion and innocent caresses became almost intolerable to Henrietta. They at once charmed and hurt her a little too much. And it was in avoidance of the tantalizing distress caused by them that she made a move to the house, passing up between the rose borders, lost in thought, her pink-lined parasol tipped over her shoulder, and little whirls of dust rising like incense—to poor Hockless' distracted fancy—about her oncoming feet.

Mrs. Mackinder's arrival and kindly invitation proved a most welcome interruption to her meditations. She accepted, with the readiest of grace, a note of gratitude in her thanks which the elder woman did not fail to observe.

"She begins to feel the position is a false one, poor little thing," Mrs. Mackinder told herself. "That makes it all very plain sailing for me. She will be glad enough

to talk thin over if I give her an opening. She is ready to listen to advice.—All's well that ends well. So the Judge may flirt with her at dinner to his heart's content and I'll forgive him." Adding aloud: "You'll come home with me now, my dear Mrs. Pereira. Dress? No, indeed, why should you? The gown you have on puts the smartest of my wardrobe to shame and makes me feel a hopeless frump. Pray come as you are.—Oh! how do you do, Imogen?" to the newcomer, rather brusquely, with raised gold eyeglasses.

The girl, superb in colouring, her whole person eloquent of the ardours of her early blossoming womanhood, had advanced to the little group stationed upon the lawn with an air of bold deliberation. She acknowledged Mrs. Mackinder's salutation off-handedly enough, keeping her great handsome eyes—at once opaque and singularly glittering, below the black bar of meeting eyebrow—fixed upon Henrietta's refined and delicately-tinted face.

"I have come, Mrs. Pereira," she said,—“though I suppose you will think my calling on you a liberty as we haven't been regularly introduced—because there's something very particular I have to speak to you about.”

"I shall be happy, of course, to hear anything you may wish to say to me," Henrietta returned.

"Oh! will you?" the girl exclaimed, slightly taken aback by the other's unruffled civility and calm. Her glance wavered for an instant, regained its boldness as she laughed with a flash of white teeth between moist, pouting lips.—“But I wouldn't be too sure about the happiness, Mrs. Pereira.”

"Indeed," Henrietta said, both voice and features hardening. Here Mrs. Mackinder intervened, and in her grandest hereditary manner.

"Whatever your errand, Imogen, I hope, both for Mrs. Pereira's convenience and my own, you will state it at

once. Mrs. Pereira is kindly going to dine with us. She is driving home with me almost immediately."

As she finished speaking, the lady went forward, Damaris skipping beside her, and, mounting the steps of the verandah, passed into the drawing-room. Henrietta motioned Imogen Hobday to follow, but the latter stood her ground.

"Not just yet, thank you, Mrs. Pereira," she said, a heat of barely repressed violence in her manner and bearing, though she hardly spoke above a whisper. "It is no use trying to snub me. I don't accept snubs. I warn you you'd much better hear me now, before you go to the Judge's."—She jerked her head in the direction of the two retreating figures. "I must settle what I mean to do before post-time to-night—and that depends entirely on you. And I must see you alone. I am not going to give myself away before her—stuck-up, haw-haw, old grannie as she is. And I am not going to budge from here till I have said what I came to say, either. You won't quite care to order the Commissioner's servants to turn me out of the house, I suppose?"

Extreme rudeness, like ready lying, is almost absurdly difficult to deal with, if conscience or habit forbid you to swear or to beat. Primitive instincts were pretty thoroughly educated out of the mid-Victorian gentlewoman. Under stress of circumstance she might still scream or swoon; but, however great the extremity, she was incapable of those simple masculine arguments—curses and fists. Henrietta therefore, being essentially a product of her age, found herself at an uncommon disadvantage with this glowing, full-fleshed, coarse-grained young termagant. She detested a scene. That must be avoided at all costs. Better temporize, better yield to the girl's importunity than plunge into wordy battle, acrimonious protest or argument.

"I am wholly at a loss to conceive what business you can have with me of so urgent a character," she replied.

"But if you will come indoors I will ask Mrs. Mackinder to drive home alone—I cannot keep her waiting while we talk.—I will follow her later. Thus, I shall be free to learn the object of your visit if—pardon me—you will be so good as to moderate your present excitement."

"Excitement? I like that!" Imogen cried scornfully. "Excitement indeed, when you're doing all in your power to wreck my life!"

"I wreck your life?" Henrietta exclaimed, heated in her turn, so that little roses blossomed carmine on the fine round of either cheek.

"Yes—yes, wrecking it—ruining my chances, just when they were looking up, when the Commissioner——"

"Oh! the Commissioner!" Henrietta commented softly, carmine spreading over face and neck.

She was on thorns. And yet—yet—more than ever did she incline to hear rather than to refuse. For, on a sudden, she saw both tumultuous visit and visitor from a new and illuminating angle; saw it, and her, as a possibly determining factor in the solution of the wearing problems with which she was beset.

Five minutes later, having disposed of Mrs. Mackinder with apologies, much-conveying glances, promises of speedy arrival, and exiled unwilling Damaris to nursery regions, Henrietta re-entered the drawing-room.

The further side of it was barred by a broad dazzle of dusty sunlight, falling obliquely through western fronting arches, and windows open to the floor. But Imogen Hobday stood clear of this, in the cool even shadow filling the centre of the room. An opulent young figure—rich contours of rounded bosom and rounded haunches perceptible notwithstanding the ungraceful stiffness of an overstarched white piqué dress. Smallness of wrist and ankle, slenderness of hands and feet, smallness of waist too—encircled by a scarlet waistband—while lending distinction to an otherwise over-ripe development, rather cruelly gave away the secret of her strain of Eastern blood.

The girl had pulled off hat and gloves, throwing them down on the floor as though impatient of encumbrance—a practical clearing for action, which Henrietta could not but note.

"I am ready, Miss Hobday. Will you sit down here"—Henrietta moved across to a red-lacquered sofa set against the inner wall of the room—"while we talk?"

"I shall stand," the girl said. Then added impulsively: "No, I won't, though. Why should I? After all, it's the Commissioner's house, not yours."

"Undoubtedly the Sultan-i-bagh is Colonel Verity's house, not mine. But let me remind you, since you unfortunately appear oblivious of the fact, that I am not only one of Colonel Verity's oldest friends, but a guest whom he expects to be treated with reasonable courtesy and respect."

"Oh! of course I know you hate me," Imogen declared sullenly, still standing.

"In that case you are better informed than I," Mrs. Pereira returned with adroit mendacity. "For I fear it has never occurred to me to ask myself what my feelings towards you were, or, indeed, whether I entertained any feeling towards you whatever. But I cannot deny a feeling may arise—namely, that of being excessively bored—unless you are obliging enough to come to the point and state the object of your unexpected visit."

"To tell you that I've written to Captain Pereira."

"What?" Henrietta cried, surprised for the instant beyond all diplomacy and self-restraint.

The girl moved away. Stood fidgeting aimlessly with the books and ornaments upon a neighbouring table, her back towards Henrietta, her head bent.

"It has been going on so long. I couldn't hold out any more or I should have got fever. I had to speak to somebody. And father's no earthly use. One can't talk to him—I begin to believe his brain's softening, he's so apathetic. Kitty's no use either. She's too awfully

jealous. You can't trust her. She's interested in nothing but her own little footy affairs with subalterns—which always end in smoke. So yesterday evening, after I saw you out on the gallery, I told Mrs. Herman Helder."

Henrietta, sitting on the red-lacquered sofa, upright, alert, her attention concentrated on each single word, each movement of the speaker, drew in her breath sharply. This, thanks to Imogen's self-absorption, passed unnoticed, and the latter continued her discourse in the same thick sullen voice.

"Mrs. Helder advised me to write. She came round to our place this morning, and brought me Captain Pereira's address. I showed her my letter. She wanted me to send it straight off without telling you. But I am not like that. I don't care to do things behind people's backs. I may have my faults—but I'm generous."

Her slender hands were still busy with the ornaments upon the table. She shoved a small brass image of Krishna aside absently. It toppled over, and sliding along the polished surface, fell on to the floor with a clang. Imogen, recalled by the sound, stooped and, picking it up, examined it anxiously. It was unbroken.

"Besides," she repeated, as she replaced the flute-playing godling on the table, "I was afraid it might do me harm with him—the Commissioner, I mean—later, if he came to know of it. Then, when I heard he was still away and you were alone here, I thought before I sent the letter, I'd be generous, as I say, and give you a chance."

For the last few seconds, Henrietta balanced, as on a tight-rope, over the abyss. Only by immense exercise of will-power could she resist vertigo, and so avoid falling headlong.

"May I ask the subject of this mysterious letter to my husband?" she asked quietly, though her throat was dry and articulation difficult.

Imogen Hobday swung round, facing her with a laugh.

"Oh! come, Mrs. Pereira," she cried, "you don't expect me to swallow that! Pretending you don't know what everyone's saying—that's a little too thick."

"And what is everyone saying—pray tell me?"

"That—that"—the girl hesitated, taken aback by the apparent sincerity of the inquiry—"you and the Commissioner—no," she declared, "I can't say it—I'm ashamed—I can't." And, the story is that, not content with him, you've flirted with young Hockless till he's in the most awful state. The Commissioner and Dr. McCabe had to sit up with him all one night to prevent his doing himself an injury—shooting himself."

Henrietta's lips were so dry, she had to moisten them with her tongue before she could speak, yet the words came with a praiseworthy effect of cool indignation.

"And these are the abominable falsehoods with which, at your friend Mrs. Helder's instigation, you have written to acquaint my husband! Is your letter posted yet, may I ask?"

"No," the girl answered, stubborn but uneasy. The interview was taking a turn she had not anticipated. "As I told you before, I'm generous. I thought I'd tell you first."

"Then you may spare yourself the trouble of posting it, Miss Hobday. To do so would be labour lost, for I shall see my husband before there would be time for it to reach him. I am returning to Delhi. I start the first thing to-morrow morning."

She paused. The dazzle had broadened as the sun sank, flooding the room, rendering it difficult to distinguish any object distinctly in the misty brightness. Again Henrietta moistened her lips.

"You talk of generosity," she went on. "In this case that virtue lies rather with me than with you, I think. It is well you did come to me, for I have saved you—at heaven knows how much pain"—her voice quavered a little—"and disgust to myself—from the commission of

an utterly disastrous mistake. Does it not occur to you that my husband would most certainly have communicated your letter to Colonel Verity? I need hardly point out the consequences. Not only your own, but your father's position would have been compromised. You would have been obliged to leave Bhutpur, and the reputation for such a very vile libel is not easily lived down. It would have clung to you. You said something, wildly and foolishly, about my wrecking your life. You have been within measurable distance of very effectually wrecking it yourself. As for your adviser in these most ill-judged and offensive proceedings, I can only suppose she judges other women's morals—or rather absence of them—by her own. You are at liberty to tell her so from me, if you like. Those who live at a low level themselves are, naturally, incapable of believing in disinterested and pure-minded friendship.—All this is very shocking, very sad, but nothing can be gained by discussing it further."

As Henrietta concluded her homily she essayed to rise from her place on the sofa. But there is a limit to the nervous energy of even the fittest, and with her the limit was reached. The room swam before her eyes. Her heart beat as in a vacuum. She felt empty, faint.

"I have listened to and answered you, Miss Hobday. Now please leave me. I have no more time at my disposal. Our interview is ended," she said.

For a minute or more Imogen stood stock still, covering Mrs. Pereira with stormy, resentful eyes, her pouting lips parted to speak. But her purpose changed. She swooped down on discarded hat and gloves, and, snatching them up, burst, like some young tornado, from the room, amid crackling of overstarched petticoats and piqué skirt.

With this somewhat melodramatic exit of the enemy, Henrietta might congratulate herself on having fought and won the battle of her life—yet not without loss.

The price of victory was heavy. She did not care to gauge it and fill in the casualty list just yet. Indeed, as the portière, masking the door into the hall, swung into place behind Imogen's disorderly retreat, she closed her eyes, and sat drooping her pretty head—her hands pressed against her left side, the apparent vacuum wherein beat her heart—an image not of triumphant conquest, but of rather piteous defeat.

Her demand was for rest, her instinct to find it by obliteration of her immediate surroundings; by shutting out sight and knowledge of the dusty and now horizontal sunshine which played on the cut-glass festoons and lustres of the chandeliers in darts and flashes of prismatic tinted light, upon the gleaming surface of red-lacquered cabinet, glistening porcelain or fiery brass. For had not the great room and its varied furnishings served as setting to episodes and emotions from which, by her own act, she had now divorced herself? Respectability, social recognition, worldly consequence, let alone those alluring festivities in honour of the high official visiting Delhi, were safe now, thank goodness, safe. But what about father and child here at the Sultan-i-bagh, what about romance?—No—no—mind and body alike refused to fill in the casualty list.—She made no noisy crying, but—unique experience—tears began to run unheeded down her cheeks.—Better perhaps never fill in those same dolorous lists at all; but let the dead go unnamed, uncounted to a common and, as soon as possible, forgotten grave.

The smell of tobacco, and Lugard's voice calling a dog, reached her from the verandah. And with these the whole worrying detail of departure rushed in on her. There was barely time. Things must be arranged immediately if she was to get away before—before Damaris was awake—for she couldn't say good-bye to the child—absolutely she could not—to-morrow morning.

The sun had sunk, misty brightness fading into the translucent oncoming of twilight. She wiped her eyes,

cleared her throat, smoothed the long curl depending from behind her ear till the tip of it lay on the swell of her bosom—the dusk would cover traces of her recent agitation—and, rising slowly, she crossed the great shadow-invaded room to seek Lugard upon the verandah.

VI

THE moon had set when, to shorten his homeward journey, Charles Verity left the main road about two hours out from Kankarpur, and, followed by Ismail Ali, turned his horse along a rough track meandering through an extensive tract of "dawk" jungle, formerly the hunting and hawking ground of the Princes of Bhutpur. Coarse sedges and crowded tussocks of sword-grass, topped by pale plumes of withered flower, alternated on the rolling upland with sandy places. Sprawling thickets of scrub in the hollows, thickened to the lush, entangled growths of a central belt of marshland, the whole offering covert to antelope, pig, wild cat, jackal, birds innumerable and various kinds of deer.

By day this bit of country, though wild enough, was poor in colour, the landscape at once featureless and confined, lacking the wide horizons and majestic amplitude of the cultivated plain. But as seen now, softened, indeterminate, traversed by skeins of low-lying mist, a vague and formless world beneath a sky of almost cruel purity, lit by the solitary jewel of the morning star, it took on an elusive, penetrating beauty to which Charles Verity found himself by no means insensible.

The hour of the dawn is fertile in spiritual awakening, spiritual enterprise. In it man's mind, unhampered by the thousand and one nakedly articulate distractions, voracious demands, and trivialities of day, works with a certain simplicity and singleness of direction. Thought

becomes cosmic and the understanding pushes towards God—the great First Cause—with the tranquillity of brotherhood, claiming its spiritual birthright, ranging itself in the forefront of created things, without hesitation or misgiving, undeterred either by false shame or by unworthy fear.

In this calm and lucid attitude Charles Verity rode forward, soothed by the even motion of his pacing horse—a flea-bitten Arab thoroughbred. The air was chill, barred with pungent earthy odours and damp with moisture drawn up from the subsoil by yesterday's heat. He fastened his short riding coat—an Afghan sheepskin, gold embroidered hide outside, thick fleece within—high about his throat. Now and again Ismail Ali would draw up alongside him on the raking brown stallion, and exchange a few words as to the bearings of the route. But, for the most part, he rode in a silence broken only by the cry of some night-bird, or swishing scurry of some startled beast. Unlovely sights lay behind him. Unlovely deeds, yet to be done, loomed large ahead. For, as he had prophesied, strange fruit must hang from the trees of Kankarpur before many weeks were out.—He had arranged preliminaries, and left the case of poor Clatworthy's murder in the keeping of an energetic young Scotch police officer, efficiently supported and fearfully keen on the successful prosecution of his first important job.—But, here and now, Charles Verity was strong enough, sufficiently master of his own nerves and mental processes, to shut down consideration of all that, and render up his soul to the inspiration of this unearthly hour before the dawn out in the grey wilderness.

Thus, though tired in body from two days and three nights of uncommonly strenuous living, with but scantiest allowance of sleep, he felt uplifted in idea and, for once, singularly at rest. The strain of conscious effort, conscious controlling of men and of circumstance, was relaxed. He neither hoped, planned, nor desired; but let himself

go in communion with the whole, in the fair vision of an essential beauty which is also ultimate truth ; all nature, all spirit, and man's place in both, resolved to the perfect harmony wherein is perfect peace.

Breasting a sandy rise he checked his horse, the shadowy tussocks of sword-grass and their pale rustling plumes to right and left. He looked up into the ineffable purity of the sky, set with that single jewel of the morning star ; and, so doing, the fret of the inherent duality of his nature, its reactions, contradictions, conflicting movements of tenderness and of cruelty, fell away from him as never before.

Almost unconsciously he broke into prayer.

" 'Oh ! Eternal Word, speak to my soul which adores Thee in profound silence. Thou, who art the great creator of all things, abandon not, I beseech Thee, Thine own creature ' "—he murmured, the words coming back to him from a manual of devotion, belonging to Lugard, into which he had once happened to look.

But sojourn in such Pisgah heights of aspiration, even for finely-tempered minds, can be but brief. Here interruption came, not from man but from beast. The brown horse neighed, flinging up his head and snuffing the air, and the grey answered. While a herd of antelope, emerging from a thicket about twenty yards distant, stood at gaze for a moment, then threaded sandy spaces and, stretching themselves, bounded over the tussocks as they fled. In their track a couple of vultures rose, heavy of wing, gorged by some loathsome meal, and flapped away slowly above the marshland, flying low and showing black against the pallor of the weaving mist. And the light broadened, not from the sky, but, as it seemed, cast upward by the earth itself, painting all objects in flat, unrelated colour, tawny yellows, harsh coppery pinks—an unnatural landscape, devoid of perspective and of shadow, chill beneath its epigene ruddiness, crude and bleak.

Then, as the false dawn faded and the upper limb of

the sun began to clear the horizon, streamers of living scarlet and vermilion raced up the Eastern sky, ravishing its virgin-sweet solemnity to the bold harlotry of common day.

Charles Verity turned in the saddle, and, beckoning Ismail Ali, bade him ride on and order a bath and breakfast at the rest-house at Kote, a little village some three miles distant, which marks the junction of this cross-country by-way with the Grand Trunk Road—running north-west to the frontier of the Punjab, and south-eastward, past Bhutpur, to far distant Benares, through the rich alluvial plain. The reign of the spirit was ended, the gift of vision withdrawn. Yet as Colonel Verity trotted forward up the sandy track which here left the jungle and skirted the cultivated land—bare of crops at this season, an unsightly chess-board of russet and umber, with whitish patches cracked and blistered by the drought—a conviction stayed by him of having, in some sort, passed behind the veil and envisaged things of immutable and everlasting worth. It stayed by him further, making him unwontedly gentle in manner and accessible of approach, when, dismounting in the shade of the village grove, he passed through the verandah of the white walled rest-house—the old khansamah, in charge, bowing himself double in tremulous, reverential ecstasy at reception of so exalted a guest.—Remained with him till, having bathed and eaten, being dog-tired and the place clean and quiet, free of other guests, he slept.

But though in respect of body, that sleep was restful, in respect of brain it proved useless as a sedative. Imagination still worked, projecting pictures not of recent events or impressions—poor young Clatworthy's purple and disfigured corpse as he had seen it yesterday, for instance, in the living-room of the bungalow at Kankarpur, prints of Oxford and photographs of a pleasant country rectory in the peaceful English Midlands upon the walls, a litter of books and periodicals upon the writing-desk and floor,

Beelzebub, king of flies, horribly in attendance, moreover, and conflicting smells of chloride of lime and of corruption choking the hot, dry air. Nor did it deal in pictures of late happenings at the Sultan-i-bagh and emotions produced by them. It swept him back to holidays spent, as a schoolboy, with his great-uncle, Thomas Clarkson Verity, at Deadham Hard, the rambling patchwork of a house, overlooking the narrow channel by which the rivers, Arne and Wilner, make their united exit from Marychurch Haven to the open sea. And more particularly did imagination fasten on, and, in entangled yet vivid images, re-create for him certain hours of the last visit he, in fact, ever paid to that soft, round, mercurial-minded little *savant*, experimental philosopher and patron of cats.

He was home for a year's leave from India, and found his great-uncle the best of good company, conversational, vivacious, witty, full of learning and of anecdote as ever. But man is a complex animal with needs other than those of the intelligence. Moreover, in the country, winter days are short, winter evenings somewhat tediously long. To Charles, then in his early thirties, in fine health and in idleness, the eternal masculine had inevitably its word to say. Hence he fell into a strange and secret love passage with a young woman in a different rank of life to his own.

About a quarter of a mile from the Hard, where the waterways of the haven narrow to a single channel, a grey stone-built inn, and three or four wooden, black tarred cottages stand on a promontory, joined to the mainland by an ancient stone-paved causeway daily submerged at high tide. Here the half-decked yacht and flat duck-punt, belonging to his great-uncle, were drawn up, along with fishing boats, upon the foreshore; and from here Charles would set forth, when the fancy took him, for an afternoon's sport among the wildfowl of the estuary. And here—waiting for the yacht to be launched or duck-punt floated—he saw and came to

speaking with the innkeeper's wife.—She, sold in marriage as a girl in her teens, for reasons of gain and of expediency, to Lemuel Faircloth, a withered anatomy of a man, crafty-eyed, broken-toothed, with red apple cheeks and piping voice ; but owner of profitable secrets and, for his station, wealthy.—At first Charles had turned away from the young woman in pity and something approaching anger, as from sight of a hawk cooped in a cage. But her serious statuesque beauty, dignity of bearing, and a high way she had with the rough company frequenting the inn—sailors, fishermen, and a lot of nondescript fellows—the latter occupied as he had reason to believe in less legitimate than lucrative methods of gaining a livelihood—interested and grew on him. A longing to open the cage door and set her free, for however short a space, grew on him also. There was an element of knight-errantry in the business, as well as elements of a baser order—let this be stated in extenuation of that which followed. At last, one day, her gray eyes told him he had to but take what he would. And he, in extenuation of her share in the business, let it be stated, that Charles Verity, at that period, was a person not easy to resist, a lover liable to conquer the affections and turn the head of far more experienced women than poor Lesbia Faircloth. To her seeing the ancient Biblical tradition repeated itself—namely that of the sons of God and their dealings with certain favoured daughters of men.

So the caged hawk was set free ; felt its wings and went, soberly brave, back to its perch again. For, from the first, there had been no question of marriage in Charles Verity's mind or of any permanent connection. Nor did Lesbia ask it. She accepted the barrier which differences of birth, education and social position interposed, as insuperable, being herself a strong, capable, clear-sighted creature.

Through the winter months love was master. In the spring came parting—nothing discovered, or, if in any

degree discovered, nothing said. Lesbia knew too much of a certain unlawful and money bringing traffic, going forward along the coast, for it to be wise to offend her. She might tell tales. While, for all her gravity of demeanour, it was on record that, when angered, she had muscles of iron and a tongue which cut like a whip. Charles sailed to rejoin his regiment in India; and, in due course, Lesbia Faircloth presented her apple-cheeked, piping-voiced husband with a son.

And there—save that he contrived to send the baby an anonymous christening gift of a hundred and fifty pounds in gold—for Charles Verity this English country idyll, to all intents and purposes, found its close. To no human being, except by most distant allusion, did he ever mention it. It passed into silence, shut away for ever from speech and sight.

Yet it left a moral scar, which ached at times—as the scars of old sins, however closely hidden, will and ought to ache. It ached now, thieving refreshment from his heavy sleep, as he lay in the bare whitewashed inner room of the wayside rest-house, while the fierce Indian sun climbed the sky and Ismail Ali, with his henna-dyed beard and magnificent swagger, mounted guard, drowsy yet watchful, outside his door.

He lived in a confused progression of trance-like perceptions rather than actual dreams, through meetings at once furtive and daring—to an accompaniment of desolate wind, crying across the mud-flats and salt marshes, desolate ebb and flow of the tides of the winter sea, desolate chuckle and sob of the dark, hurrying rivers, beneath the low arch of the winter sky, as he and Lesbia sought and found one another at house or inn. The thought of that winter chill and desolation filled him with indescribable longing for the romance of cold, of heavy neutral colour, and of wet. She carried a freshness with her, her clothes smelling of the brine, her hair of wood-smoke. Her body, he remembered, was cool to his touch.

Instinctively he felt out across the narrow camp bed to find it—thrust his hand into hot vacancy, and with a struggle and groan awoke. Swung his legs down over the side of the bedstead and sat up, smitten by a strange distress, unable at first to recall time or place.

"Good God, the boy must be fifteen by now!" he said aloud.

Then his glance fastened on Ismail Ali, typical fighting man, Oriental, barbaric, standing at attention in the doorway.

"Did my lord call?"

Colonel Verity shook his head.

"No, I did not call. But you did well to come to me. I have slept long enough. Order them to bring round the horses. It is time I got back to the Sultan-i-bagh," he said.

VII

THREE wide roadways running abreast—shaded by a double avenue of shisham trees. The middle one cambered and metalled ; the others rutted, deep in blown sand and dust. And, along all three, a broken but unending procession, infinitely varied and picturesque, of vehicles, horsemen, multitudes on foot.—Long trains of bullock-carts with solid wooden discs as wheels ; strings of camels ; companies of soldiers, infantry or cavalry, upon the march, baggage wagons and camp-followers in their rear ; gaudy curtained palanquins, borne on the shoulders of scantily-clothed coolies ; ekkas, with their peaked tilts—like miniature twin pagodas—drawn by half-broken, country-bred ponies or neat little trotting bulls. Now and again the enormous leaden-grey bulk of an elephant rolling its way, as a porpoise among a school of herrings, through the throng. The carriage of some wealthy merchant or native gentleman of rank, spirited horses, dashing outriders, amid much shouting flashing by ; dark, swiftly-moving figures, naked save for a loin-cloth, carrying their worldly all in two square bundles, swinging from either end a long bamboo ; droves of tiny donkeys hidden beneath disproportionate loads. Fakirs smeared with ashes ; leprous, piebald beggars, toe and fingerless ; snake charmers, plying rattle or drum, hung with covered baskets containing cobras and long-haired Persian cats. Families of nomads, wandering gipsies, hill-people filthy of aspect, clothed in heavy woollen plaids ; ubiquitous dogs, cattle,

sheep and goats.—A riot of heady noise, movement, colour, beneath the sparse shade of the trees, while the sun mounted higher in the tawny sky, the dust rose in thicker clouds, the air grew drier and more intense—such was the Grand Trunk Road, when Damaris Verity saw it, on his ten-mile ride from Kote to Bhampur that April morning.

The moral scum smothered, which both fretted and saddened him. Thoughts of the fifteen-year-old boy, somewhere in England, bearing another man's name, although his eldest and only son, pursued him with suddenly awakened sense of shame and self-reproach. His longing for the boy's mother, too, engendered by the deluding phantasies of sleep, angered him. For did not, indeed, this unlooked for recrudescence of that wild and discreditable episode, following immediately on his fair hour of spiritual apprehension and God-given peace, amount to a brutally ribald joke at his expense? The irony of the thing stung him. He hardened under the provocation and pain of it, seeking relief in the duality of his nature, calling arrogance, the pride of personal and arbitrary power, to his support.

And to this more habitual, though less excellent, frame of mind the scene about him offered encouragement, as—unarmed, and alone, save for his servant—he rode here among the dark, conquered populations, ranging through all social grades from prince to mendicant, to whom, in virtue of his office, he was over-lord, called to govern, reward, punish and control. The present was far from despicable, surely, in its largeness of opportunity and pride of place, even though certain memories might be smirched! He bade the past hold its peace, go about its business, and fixed his mind to the present. And, so doing, the composed, sprightly, light-stepping figure of Henrietta Pereira entered upon his mental stage once more.

With a certain half-cynical movement of apology, he was constrained to own that, during the time which had elapsed since their somewhat dramatic farewell in the drawing-room of the Sultan-i-bagh, he had thought but

little about her. Even now, still smarting—whether he chose to acknowledge it or not—from the ribald joke played on him, he was disposed to regard the whole question of women from an unsympathetic standpoint. Henrietta herself could not wholly escape. He viewed her critically, admitting her limitations. Yet, in good truth, were not those very limitations in great measure the source of her unique attraction? Not only what she was, but what she happily was incapable of being, weighed in the balance.—A matchless piece of domestic furniture, perfect companion for a man's hours of leisure, of relaxation from the cares of office and of State, delicious in her studied coquetry, her quick ability to profit and to please, amusing, moreover, and, according to a worldly fashion, wise. Then for the negative virtues—which, in daily life, count for so much!—Her demand would never be exaggerated, too carnal or too mystical, in the practice of the affections; but temperate, strictly within the limits of good taste. Solemnity, absorption, high-flown sentiment in respect of love, she would find tiresome, a bore. She was refreshingly, restfully, superficial; a plant born of light and air, easily sustained, whose delicate tendrils were warranted never to strangle or roots to strike too deep.

So Charles Verity reasoned in a rising scale of commendation, appreciation, sitting upright in the saddle, his head carried high, steering his course, with a fine indifference and abstraction, through the ever-changing maze of form and colour, meeting, passing, encircling him in the quivering dust of the great Oriental highway.—Reasoned, to convince himself that he did not stand on the verge of another feminine disaster, such as his marriage to Agnes Hackwood, or the affair with Lesbia Faircloth, which had left him this moral ache and scar.—But, save for the bare fact of her sex, Henrietta very certainly had nothing whatever in common with either of those other two women, who, though in different ways, had so deeply affected his life. That was precisely why, as he argued, she so strangely held

him ; and would continue to hold him. How could he doubt it, judging by the experience of these weeks of constant intercourse ? Hadn't she renewed his ambition, renewed his interest in life, given him back—in a sense—the fire of his youth ?

Thereupon brute rage shook him, intellectual and fine gentleman though he was, remembering the length of time Henrietta, either through the action of circumstance or by intention, had been beyond his reach ; and, as outcome of that rage, a headlong need to assert his male supremacy, seize and finally subdue this fragile, tantalizing sprite of a thing which so persistently invited and escaped his grasp. Towards Pereira he had no mercy, no scruples, no feeling save of contemptuous disgust. Wasn't it enough that the fellow, so Carteret once intimated, both gambled and drank ?—The Commissionership would have to go, he supposed. Well, let it. There were greater prizes to be won by those who possessed knowledge and courage to deserve them—spheres in which a man could be master in his own house, moreover ; his domestic affairs conducted in decent privacy instead of under the lens of a malevolent social microscope. But these last considerations amounted, in his present attitude, to no more than a side issue.—He had waited long, and more than long, enough. Now his patience was exhausted, his pride touched. He wanted Henrietta, and have her simply he would and must. He defied all risks, ready to put the harvest of years to the sickle, even though, in the sequel, he chanced to reap a bellyful of wind rather than profitable fullness of bread.

Hence it followed that, when at last he left the stir and travel of the Grand Trunk Road for the comparative solitude of the tamarind avenue, outlying buildings of the Bhutpur cantonments on his left, the open space of the Maidan on his right, Charles Verity's mind, for the second time that day, had cleared to singleness of idea and of direction. Yet his second idea stood wide apart from the first. For its tendency was downward, of the earth earthy, a somewhat

damvably effectual turning of the back upon visions of divine harmony and all-reconciling peace.

The air seemed cooler here under the wide-spreading tamarind trees, or at least lighter, with more spring in it. The horses behaved a little, freshening up, prepared to make a gallant entry to the Sultan-i-bagh. The scene changed, too, overlaid, in details, by that singular and incongruous Western veneer—witness to the solidarity, the imperviousness, and immutability of the British character—which England contrives to impose upon India.

For—along with a general neatness and trimness of walls, gateways, well-watered gardens, well-kept carriage drives, comely and spacious bungalows—typically English figures, notwithstanding disguise of sun-helmet or brown-holland habit, began to present themselves.—Colonel Waterhouse jogging home from his morning ride along the pleasant, shady perspective. Mrs. Hermon Helder, with Captain Dewsbery—a drawling, sulky-looking young man, whose brains were in inverse ratio to the, reputed, largeness of his income—as usual, in close attendance. The lady glanced with veiled impertinence at Colonel Verity as she bowed, uttered a quick aside to her companion and broke in a forced little laugh directly she had passed him.

Then something more exotic came into view. The Hobday girls rattled up. And either the chestnut pony's nerves were extra badly on edge, or Imogen's hand was extra cruel on its mouth, for, just as they got alongside Colonel Verity, it swerved, tilting the cart up on one wheel, and tried to bolt in a series of zigzag rushes. Miss Kitty screamed shrilly; and Imogen, her vivid complexion blue-white for once, in the shadow of her broad-brimmed pith hat, dragged at the reins and plied her whip wildly.

Colonel Verity turned, with an imperious lift of the head, looking in considerable annoyance after the reeling vehicle. Did courtesy demand his going to the young ladies' assistance? Fortunately there were people on the road quite as capable of averting a smash as himself. He had not the

smallest wish to advertise himself as Miss Imogen's saviour. Moreover, the occurrence struck him as conceivably not wholly accidental.—In this last, it should be added, he did Imogen injustice.—Therefore he rode on, his face keen and still, his eyes sad, intent, yet at the back of them soundless laughter not a little disquieting to see.

VIII

ACRY went forth that the master of the house had come.

Lugard was somewhat nonplussed, having reckoned, swift in action though the Commissioner was, it must take him a full day more to get through his business at Kankar-pur. This would have made the position easier, as giving things in general—himself, Lugard, included—time to settle down into the ordinary routine again. The young man felt in need of a breathing-space. Events had marched with rather confusing rapidity. However, there was no help for it. The position must be met and dealt with. Shirking was impossible although, as he swung out across the hall and into the portico, he was disagreeably conscious of a nervous tightening in the muscles of his throat and a sinking in the region of the stomach reminiscent of very youthful experiences.

Halfway down the steps he met Colonel Verity ; and, so doing, received an impression whereby that same sinking was by no means alleviated. Unless he was much mistaken, he was in for an uncommonly awkward quarter of an hour. For Sir Lancelot—upsettingly attractive, compelling, superb, indeed, however potentially sinful—stood before him, incarnate. His enthusiasm caught alight, and the prospect of dealing this worshipful being an unprovoked blow fairly sickened him. He felt a hound, he told himself, a traitor.

To make matters worse Colonel Verity slipped his hand within Lugard's arm, greeting him affectionately. A light

was on his face, a charm of almost playful eagerness in his manner.

"Well, you see I was right, Maurice. You might have spared yourself shudders. As I told you, those Kankarpur gentry know better than to try conclusions with the old tiger."

"I'm awfully thankful, sir," Lugard said, from his heart.

"Thank you," Colonel Verity answered. "And now, what is your report? All well here?"

"I hope so, sir."

"Which, being interpreted, means that it is not, I suppose. Out with it, Maurice, what has happened? Has Hockless had a relapse, and been giving more trouble?"

"Oh! Jimmy's as right as rain, sir—on the road to be heartily ashamed of himself, if ever he gets wind of his own lunacies."

Then Lugard doubled. It took not only all his courage, but all his good-breeding to handle the main issue, to toe the line between the offence of knowing too much and that of knowing too little. He allowed himself a moment's respite, speaking of yesterday's fruitless visits of the Assistant Commissioner and Revenue Officer. He wanted to get indoors, moreover, before delivering that traitorous blow.

"I would have asked them to stay the night, sir," he explained, "but as your return was uncertain I thought it best not. It might only complicate matters for them, as I didn't count on your being home before to-morrow morning at earliest."

"Yes, yes"—Colonel Verity pushed the explanations aside with slight impatience. "Anything else?"

"It's been a bit of a rush this morning, sir."

Lugard fixed his eyes on the ground as he spoke.—Thank goodness they were in the hall now, free of the servants and the glare!

"Indeed, how so?" Colonel Verity asked.

He took his hand from the young man's arm and moved a step or two away from him.

"To arrange about horses in time," Lugard replied rather incoherently. He had much ado to keep his voice steady. It sounded unnaturally loud to him; a voice not his own but somebody else's—a silly, purposeless, shouting sort of voice. "I sent on a runner to make sure of the three stages beyond Kote. After that the service is pretty regular. Mrs. Pereira's news made it imperative she should start for Delhi this morning."

Lugard was aware of a slight movement, a slight sound—the scrape of a boot-heel on the marble floor, it might be. He did not raise his eyes, but continued speaking in the same—to him—silly, shouting voice.

"I don't think there's the remotest doubt about the relays of horses. Still, the whole affair was rather a scramble. It couldn't be avoided. Mrs. Pereira only told me in the evening, just before she went out—she was dining with the Mackinders. You see," he continued, trying instinctively to soften his statement with plausible, special pleading, "she didn't want anything known for fear of making Damaris unhappy. She—she funk'd the parting awfully, sir."

He paused, listening, anxious for some sign, some comment. But none came. The quiet grew ominous. He kept his eyes fixed upon the inlay patterns of the marble floor, and forced himself to go on talking.

"Mrs. Pereira told me you, of course, knew all about her plans; that she might be obliged, I mean, to leave before you got back. But she hadn't given a whisper of it to Damaris. She had the idea Damaris would fret less if she hadn't the good-bye hanging over her—if she only knew when it was an accomplished fact. The consequence was I had to engineer all the arrangements between dinner time last night and five this morning."

And there Lugard's tongue failed him. This continued quiet and the utter lack of response were paralysing. He

could think of no single word to say which might not trench on indiscretion or be construed into impertinence. Respect and delicacy demanded complete neutrality on his part. And he couldn't keep that up—he knew he couldn't. His own voice grew intolerable, moreover, insincere, blatant. If Colonel Verity had turned on him and cursed him, he could have welcomed such abuse, however unmerited. For this affected calm, this abeyance of speech and of action, racked him with suspense. A little more, and he felt he should be guilty of some gross blunder, when relief came, actual though of distressing inference.

A door opened on the gallery above, letting forth a sound of wailing. Not that of ordinary baby discomfort or naughtiness, but eloquent of a convinced and realized extremity of grief.

"Henrietta," Damaris wailed. And again—"Oh! Oh! Henrietta, oh! Henrietta."

Both Lugard and Colonel Verity started, looked one another in the face, self-forgotten, as this piteous lament first reached them. For it was shocking in its depth of suffering, in its largeness of despair—unendurable, as the expression of a little child's capacity of sorrow. Moved by a common impulse, the two men made toward the staircase. But, before they reached it, the door closed again, muting the sound; yet thus, by implied suppression, implied concealment, rendering the thin echoes of it only the more piteous.

With his hand on the ramp of the marble baluster, Colonel Verity paused, threw back his head, and broke silence at last.

"You need come no further, Maurice," he said; "although your precautions, taken to spare the possible unhappiness, do not appear to be crowned with conspicuous success."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but——" Lugard began. Colonel Verity interrupted him.

"No blame attaches to you. I attribute none. I only

state a self-evident fact—which, as I have already intimated, I prefer to deal with alone."

And, having delivered this ultimatum, Colonel Verity went on up the steep, winding flight, indifferent as to the hurt he might have inflicted. Lugard, indeed, passed out of mind as well as out of sight, as he questioned from precisely whence the wailing came which still tore at his vitals. Not, he trusted, from the room which he hated to enter, and which, for that very reason, as a salutary precaution, he had allotted his all-too-welcome guest.

At the stairhead Sarah Watson awaited him, her face grey as her dress.

"Will you speak to Miss Damaris, sir, please?" she said. "She has been going on like this for over an hour, working herself up into a shocking state. I can do nothing with her, and I don't know what the end of it will be if she's not brought to reason soon.—No, not the nursery, sir."

Colonel Verity neither looked at the speaker nor answered her; but, crossing the gallery, opened the door of the dreaded room, and, passing within, shut it behind him, turning the key in the lock. And, so doing, he was conscious of transition from man's world to woman's—from the free life of the open to secluded life behind the curtain. Conscious of being confronted by matters intimate, hidden, and to him, eminently disturbing. For memories ran abreast fact, and fact resolved itself into symbol of that which—long desired and on the tip of accomplishment—had been so treacherously snatched from him.

The effect was heightened by a lifeless atmosphere, heavy with the mingled odour of flowers, some spilled perfume, and the tang of a burned-out oil lamp; and by the dimness of the light—to which it took a perceptible time for his eyes to grow accustomed—the windows being still closed, as were the slatted outside shutters. Gradually, as surrounding objects shaped themselves, he saw the room was in rather unseemly disorder, furniture

shifted, drawers yawning open, wardrobe doors flung wide. Sheets of tissue paper, torn letters, empty cardboard boxes, littered the floor. Colonel Verity glanced at these scattered debris of feminine occupation and hurried departure; and, the dust of his forty miles ride still upon him, strode across to the carved, pillared bed occupying the middle of the room. Halfway his foot caught and he stumbled, to find, on stooping down, a long trail of light blue ribbon entangled in the rowels of his spurs.

The bed was unmade, the clothes stripped back at an angle from bolster to foot, leaving a broad white expanse. And upon it, just distinguishable in the low light, the soft cloud of Damaris' hair, the bronze of her little shoes, the pink of her hands as she beat upon the pillows, her face hidden, wailing, wailing, tearless, tossing her slender white-clad body to and fro in the abandonment of her grief. And Charles Verity, tall and spare, graceful though slightly angular in high boots, cord breeches and short white drill riding jacket—girt with a leather belt at the waist—stood and watched her, letting the sight of her anguish soak into his eyes and brain.

He registered each tone and turn of it, finding bitter luxury in witnessing this spectacle of woe. It satisfied, and, in a sense, relieved him, as expressing openly, proclaiming aloud, all that which the pride of manhood forbade his expressing and proclaiming himself. Meanwhile he blinked no detail of his surroundings or of the associations and suggestions which they evoked. He granted imagination licence to call up scenes and incidents which had taken place formerly, or—as he only too easily divined—recently in this room. Let it run forward too, projecting scenes and incidents which, very surely, would have taken place had Henrietta Pereira proved less prudent and more true.

Still she was within her rights. Her flight was laudable, of course—only how devilishly astute the manner of it! How cleverly she had closed his—Charles Verity's—mouth,

leaving him gagged and bound; and this without any violence or direct falsehood told. It was a masterpiece of strategy, even down to the concealment of her intentions till the eleventh hour, under plea of saving this poor, writhing, broken-hearted babe superfluous distress. Yet, when he came to consider it, how natural, how essentially in the part! For is not the light-minded woman, who is also virtuous, quite the most damnably selfish being on the face of God's earth?

And thereupon his philosophy gave, so that he was filled with the weariness of a mortal disgust—disgust of humanity, disgust of life itself, disgust of Who-ever or what-ever is the primal cause and inventor of life. Not the wonder or splendour, or even the tragedy of things created; but their squalor, their ever present bathos bit into his consciousness, scarring it as the burin scars the metal. He looked at the distracted child. To what purpose was this misery, this waste? The abysmal futility of it all!

He sat down on the edge of the unmade bed.

"Damaris," he said, "listen. You have mourned enough. Stop, my dear. It leads nowhere. It is useless."

The child started. Her wailing ceased. She raised her head and struggled on to her knees, facing him. An instinct of personal dignity, and of respect for her father's presence, made her push back her hair and smooth down the front of her crumpled frock.

"Commissioner Sahib, I never heard you come. I never knew you was here," she gasped.

"But I am here," he answered. "So you must stop mourning. Mourning is a delusion and a lie, my dear, like faith, like prayer and much else. It cannot modify or alter, by one hair's breadth, that which is."

What his words might signify Damaris did not understand. But she did understand what he required of her. He saw will, resolution, working in her quivering face and in the stiffening of her fragile body—will to respond, to

obey, to fulfil the order given—and, so seeing, took grim joy in her.

"But Henrietta's gone away," she explained with shuddering catches of breath, rushes of speech, and halting pauses. "And she didn't never tell me. And when I went to the window—like I do every morning to come in and sit on her bed and see how beautiful pretty she looks when she wakes up to eat her *chota hazri*—all the shutters was shut. And I waited, and waited, for 'Sepha Maria to open them and let me come in, and she never didn't open them. And I got tired of waiting and runned round through the nursery, and Tulsi tried to 'vent me coming here. But I wouldn't be 'vented. I said naughty words to Tulsi. And when I came to the door it was all dark. And I was frightened, and all hurt inside of me 'cause I could find no Henrietta, nor 'Sepha Maria nor 'Loysius; and all the baggage, and Henrietta's darling little treasures what she let me touch and play with was gone. And Nannie came to fetch me away, and I wouldn't be fetched. Then Nannie was cross and scolded me, and tried to carry me. But I wouldn't be carried. And I was dreadful naughty and beat Nannie. And I got into Henrietta's bed, 'cause she's so beautiful pretty before she puts her fart clothes on—and 'cause—'cause I wanted to feel near her again. Oh! why didn't she never tell me she was going and bid me good-bye."

"She did not tell me either," Charles Verity said.

Surely in this marriage-chamber, birth-chamber, death-chamber, strewn with the signs of her treacherous desertion, he might disregard obligations of chivalry and speak the truth, as it stood between himself and Henrietta Pereira, this once.

"But she was clever in not telling either you or me," he went on. "She saw the road to safety and made haste to walk along it, like a sensible creature. Her reasons for silence were excellent, my dear—never doubt that."

Damaris shrank, vaguely apprehending something

inimical in his attitude. The consolation and stimulus of his presence suffered eclipse. He, though so beloved, seemed forbidding; seemed—as she put it—as if he would like “to do something dreadful unkind;” and this proved too great a strain on resolution and obedience. She clasped her hands convulsively upon her flat little bosom, grief coming into its own again with an overwhelming rush.

“But I want her, Commissioner Sahib. I love Henrietta, oh! I love her and I want her,” she wailed.

“And so, by God, do I,” Charles Verity answered. For on a sudden, stoicism dragged anchor; and grief—in his case, a blind rage of indignation and of frustrated passion—came into its own.

He sprang up and roamed the great room, violently thrusting aside whatever obstructed his passage, treading the light feminine wreckage of Mrs. Pereira's late tenancy savagely under foot; while Damaris, still kneeling upright upon the white expanse of the unmade bed, gazed at him fascinated, following his every movement in awe-struck, wide-eyed amazement. Her mind refused credence to that which she beheld. It was too wild a subversion of probability, an upheaval altogether too inconceivable of the fabric of her small private heaven and earth, that her father, the mighty all-wise and all-powerful Commissioner Sahib, should run amuck thus! She was too bewildered, too astounded to utter any sound. But presently, her head drooped and she fell to crying softly, her face hidden in the cloud of her hair.

Where a nature is, at bottom, of noble quality, however, rage sooner or later is bound to supply its own antidote in the shape of wholesome shame. Charles Verity's madness passed; or, rather, he mastered it, himself casting out the devil of blind rage. For, stopping by the bedside and looking down at the sad little bowed and kneeling figure, he was smitten by remorse and self-contempt. Had he not allowed his ill-starred love of Henrietta Pereira

to vex his marriage, to come as a blight between himself and his young wife? Was he going, at once weakly and brutally, to let it come between him and his child? Was Damaris also to be sacrificed? Why, in the name of common justice, common humanity, should she be broken, because Henrietta capped flagrant acts of coquetry, with a tardy—equally flagrant—act of virtue? Common justice, reason, humanity, cried out against it. This torture of innocence had lasted long enough.

He bent down over the bed, took the child up, seating her in the hollow of his left arm and laying her head upon his shoulder. His action was very gentle, his touch instinct with protection and, hence, with comfort. It reached Damaris' understanding. In response, her hands felt out feebly and clasped him round the neck, her soft little body, exhausted by emotion, lying inert, against his breast. For a good minute or more he remained holding her thus in encompassing tenderness, though without direct or spoken caress, concentrating his whole thought and attention upon her so as to restore her faith in him, and recreate, if possible, the fullness of her trust. He owed her that, poor, helpless baby martyr, after the ordeal through which he had permitted her to pass.

Then he looked steadily round the room—ambiguous, vaguely provocative, vaguely malevolent in that meagre infiltration of daylight—while he tried to sum up at once its message and its sentiment.

The message was of failure. The sentiment a warning, and—

Charles Verity stayed to inquire no further, but, holding the child closer, went over to the door. Unlocking it, with his right hand, he set it wide open, and—a strangeness, even wildness in his aspect—passed out from the furtive half-dark, the heavy perfume-laden and oil-tainted atmosphere, into the pure air and clear, steady daylight of the lofty gallery. So doing, he was conscious—not without

confliction of relief and of tearing emotional and physical distress—of coming back into man's world, into the free life of the open, as distinct from woman's world, the secluded life lived behind the curtain. As he shut the door behind him, a conviction seized on him that he had ended commerce with all that; and that to him, in future, woman would mean nothing—always saving and excepting his relation to Damaris, whose innocent body rested warm and languid upon his breast.

Sarah Watson, coming from the nursery to claim her charge, drew back. Ismail Ali, waiting for his master's orders, in the hall below, drew back likewise—the former in jealous anguish, the latter in proud reverence. "My lord would be alone with his own—it was enough!"—For Colonel Verity carried the child to his quarters—downstairs—the great saloon, occupying the north-west angle of the house, between the billiard-room and his own bed-chamber, in which he worked. The windows stood open on to the northern verandah, where breakfast had been set out ready for his coming. Here all was cool, dignified, reposeful. He sat down in an armchair, lowering Damaris on to his knee. But her head nodded back limply against his upper arm, and he saw she had fallen asleep. He laid her upon a couch. She turned on her side with a sigh, nestling down among the cushions. Her breathing was regular, her pulse steady, her skin moist.—Let her sleep, poor baby, while she could; her sorrow, for a time at least, obliterated and forgot.

Colonel Verity had no appetite for breakfast. Suddenly he realized how done, how utterly weary and spent he was. He had not energy either to eat, or even to change, as yet. He went over to the big writing-table upon which, in neat files, Lugard had arranged the two days' correspondence ready for inspection. Heading the second file was a letter which, by the handwriting and Government imprint, arrested his attention. It proved to be from a certain very high official, announcing his impending stay at Delhi; and

expressing the wish—if convenient to Colonel Verity—of making a *détour* on the return journey, and spending some hours at the Sultan-i-bagh.

"I shall not inflict a cohort upon you," he wrote, "but send the bulk of my unwieldy following forward to the village where I propose to make my camp for the night. Pray consider my visit as a private one, and let me have the pleasure of a good long conversation with you. There is much concerning these districts and your, I fear rather turbulent, subjects which is of extreme interest and which you alone can tell me."

The letter ended with appreciative and friendly phrases. Colonel Verity was sensible of a movement of pleasure. Yes, let the high official break his journey at Bhutpur by all means. He should be told things which might surprise him a little, and which it would be decidedly profitable he should know.—Colonel Verity re-read the letter, noting the dates of the writer's arrival at, and proposed departure from, Delhi—sat a moment, his head raised, his eyes fixed, his lips parted in a soundless exclamation. He had received illumination. He perceived that not preservation of endangered virtue alone had dictated Henrietta Pereira's precipitate retreat from the Sultan-i-bagh.

BOOK VI

*THE TRAGEDY OF A SMALL GREEN JADE
ELEPHANT*

I

MRS. MACKINDER sat in one of a long row of garden chairs, on the shady side of the club house, immediately below the verandah.

Before her, upon the lawn—a very creditable expanse of turf granted difficulties of soil and of climate—games of croquet were in progress.—The players, men and ladies were alike arrayed in light-coloured garments, with the exception of Mr. Gardiner, the Government chaplain, gaunt and worried-looking, the uncompromising blackness of whose alpaca suit showed a hard, vertical line among the blond figures moving to and fro over the smooth green carpet. From the white-domed bandstand in the centre of the great square enclosure, where three broad alleys met, came strains of music—wind and brass—swinging vales and florid opera airs then in vogue.

A pleasing amenity marked the scene. A pleasing distinction even, since the club grounds—covering the site of a garden dating from days anterior to British occupation—boasted fine cypresses, shade and fruit trees, *massives* of flowering shrubs; and, beyond the bandstand, a straight, marble-lipped canal, with fountain jets, leading to a raised terrace surmounted by a red sandstone pavilion.

Mrs. Mackinder surveyed the scene complacently and turned to Colonel Waterhouse, who filled the adjoining chair—his hat tilted over his eyes, the somewhat globular central region of his person much in evidence, as, the fronts of his jacket thrown open, he leaned back in an easy

attitude, a cigar between the first and second fingers of his left hand, his right thumb stuck in the arm-hole of his yellow nankeen waistcoat. Mrs. Mackinder fully intended to put a few pins into him during the course of conversation, but felt it politic to preface the operation with a doselet of flattery.

"Decidedly you have worked wonders since you took over the management of the club," she said. "You have made the grounds perfectly delightful, and in such a short time, too. Barely two years, isn't it? But whatever your faults—you have one or two, you know——"

"Which you, dear lady, are never backward in pointing out to me."

"I do it for your good. For the good of the community, too, perhaps when your conversation grows a little too scandalous.—But that's another matter. As I was about to say—your gift for house and garden planning amounts to genius."

"'An infinite capacity of taking pains,' " he quoted, "nothing more. I don't deny I have laboured, risen early, taken rest late, and very literally sweated over these few acres. I didn't fancy a clean sweep and an attempt to introduce English landscape gardening fashions. I wanted to work in all the stuff I had under my hand—that charming little canal, for instance. For those ferocious old Moghuls knew their business, after all, I tell you. Amusing fellows, alternately making mincemeat of the mild Hindu and making Gardens of Paradise, Gardens of Felicity—laying out flower-beds in the intervals of laying out the native population. I like 'em—share their hobbies, as far as gardening goes anyway. I confess my fingers have itched, ever since I came here, to get to work on the compound of the Sultan-i-bagh. In its palmy days it must have been a dream; and it's still capable of restoration. More than once I've sounded Verity; but he doesn't seem to see it unfortunately—prefers to let the whole thing revert to jungle. A thousand pities!—By the way"—he leaned

sideways, lowered his voice, becoming confidential—"there are rumours the visit of a certain exalted personage didn't pass off altogether smoothly the day before yesterday Verity is reported to have been edgy and inclined to show his teeth. That miserable Kankarpur affair, I gather—Consequent prospect of friction at head-quarters.—Have you also heard?"

"And disbelieved what I heard, as usual. No—no, my dear Colonel, after the bursting of the Pereira bubble, I'm more than ever deaf to rumour, I warn you."

An expression of lively relish overspread Colonel Waterhouse's countenance. With an upward twitch of his whole person, he threw one short leg across the other and nursed his ankle, gazing knowingly at the toecap of his Oxford shoe.

"Hum—hum—in your opinion the bubble did burst, then?"

"Really you go a little too far," Mrs. Mackinder protested, slightly nettled. "It is not a question of my opinion, but of simple fact. Mrs. Pereira dined with us the night before she left, and—poor thing—was too worried to play a part—talked quite frankly and naturally, forgetting all her little airs and graces. She told me the whole story—which, moreover, the Commissioner confirmed, when I spoke to him about it."

"Such a thing has been heard of as the covering of tracks."

—A remark which Mrs. Mackinder thought well to ignore.—

"I quite own I was doubtful about her at first; and I still think her stopping at the Sultan-i-bagh was a mistake. But I understand how it came about. She had been going through a good deal and was rather desperate. Evidently the husband is no good."

"So few of them are," Waterhouse returned feelingly. "That, to be candid, has been my main reason for eschewing the honourable estate and remaining a bachelor. I

have some tenderness for my own character ; and, as a married man, there's no telling what nasty tricks I mightn't have caught myself out playing ! ”

“ Very possibly,” she returned. “ The surprises of marriage are not invariably limited to discoveries regarding one's partner.—But to return to Mrs. Pereira. She admitted she had stretched a point in coming. But, as she told me, it was an old promise. She made sure of finding plenty of other people stopping in the house ; and then—she knew perfectly well who she had to deal with in her host.”

Colonel Waterhouse's mouth drew down humorously at one corner.

“ The things you dear ladies do say to one another in private ! ” he murmured. “ A blow though, distinctly a blow. I had begun to flatter myself Verity, too, was human ! And what about the dashing Miss Imogen ? What about her spirited routing of the fair rival ? ”

“ Oh ! there you labour under an entire misconception,” Mrs. Mackinder declared. “ Imogen Hobday's extraordinary *démarche*—Mrs. Pereira was too nice to say much about it afterwards, but I was present when the girl forced her way in—had no effect whatsoever upon Mrs. Pereira's plans. They were settled much earlier. She had merely been waiting to hear from home, and the letters arrived that morning. Do, I beg,” she added, raising her voice and speaking in her grandest manner, “ disabuse your mind of the idea that Imogen Hobday's objectionable exhibition of temper influenced Mrs. Pereira's movements in the smallest degree.”

One of the games of croquet had terminated. And the players, the chaplain and his wife among them, after standing in a little group, discussing strokes and points of generalship—not without a hint of acrimony—advanced towards the row of chairs.

“ Yes, Mrs. Gardiner, pray sit down here,” Mrs. Mackinder cried, indicating the vacant seat on her left, as

the lady in question, with a fixed smile and pale, covetous eye, detaching herself from her companions paused before her.

"So very kind of you, but I could easily find a place elsewhere."

Mrs. Gardiner turned her smile upon Waterhouse, who nipped on to his feet with polite agility.

"Good game, eh?" he inquired genially.

"I am afraid I am a very poor performer," she returned. "You see, with the many duties which claim me I have no leisure for practice. And even in amusements practice is, don't you feel, necessary if one would be a proficient? A game now and then to satisfy my little ones, Colonel Waterhouse, is all I can allow myself.—But shall I really sit here, Mrs. Mackinder? You are sure I shall not interrupt your conversation? One is always so diffident of interfering with a pleasant talk."

"Oh! our talk is one you are perfectly welcome to share—isn't it, Colonel? We were speaking of an extremely ill-judged call Imogen Hobday elected to make at the Sultan-i-bagh last week, which has led, as I gather, to all manner of foolish gossip. I take for granted, seeing as much of those two girls as you do, Mrs. Gardiner, you must have heard some version of what took place?"

Colonel Waterhouse subsided into his chair again. Which lady would get the best in the encounter, and what would her tactics be? He was keenly interested. Mrs. Gardiner's smile became increasingly stereotyped, her voice extra silky, her manner deprecating—a veritable embodiment of the turning of the other cheek, as he put it.

"I try to render any little help where I can," she said. "And I have encouraged those two lonely girls to come to me in their troubles. In my position—as their pastor's wife, I mean—it was right, don't you think, I should strive to counsel them if they sought me? But—yes—I do fear Imogen may have been a little excited."

"Excited! Excessively impertinent, even before me.

And after I left, her behaviour went from bad to worse. Though don't, pray, be under a wrong impression. Mrs. Pereira was most moderate, really charming, in what she said to me about it later."

"I am so very glad to hear that—so very glad. One is so thankful, don't you always feel, to find one has been mistaken in forming an adverse opinion of any new acquaintance?"

Here Waterhouse permitted himself a subdued chuckle.

But the speaker was on to him in an instant.

"You said?" she inquired, craning forward so as to command a view of him round the interposing barrier of Mrs. Mackinder's person.

"Nothing, my dear madam, nothing," he cried. "In deep and silent humility I listen and—I learn."

The lady continued to crane, shifting her pale glance from one to other of her two auditors with mild, supplicatory insistence.

"It is a delicate case and one in which a motherless girl is at so much disadvantage, so liable to be carried away by her feelings. And we must all agree, don't you think, that Imogen Hobday had received great provocation?"

Mrs. Mackinder's gold eyeglasses enfiladed the speaker.

"Provocation? I am afraid I do not quite follow you," she said coldly, and, as she almost immediately realized, unwisely. For, hearing Waterhouse chuckle again, swift suspicion seized her that his amusement, this time, was at her own expense. Mrs. Gardiner's silky tones took up their tale, meanwhile, with uncomfortably suggestive alacrity.

"Oh! no—but, pardon me, it is so very difficult to suppose an attachment, which we all, I think, must earnestly hope to be mutual, should have escaped your observation, dear Mrs. Mackinder! One should always be cautious, don't you feel, in mentioning anything of the kind, where a young girl is concerned? But this attachment, I thought, was quite recognized. Mr. Gardiner and

I—and he is most scrupulous—have often spoken about it. We trusted, for the sake of everyone concerned, it would end happily. The last few weeks have been sadly anxious to Mr. Gardiner. He felt a cloud rested upon the Station and his work here. I have seldom seen him so distressed. He felt that, what we could not but fear—I am so happy to find from you, quite erroneously—constituted a reflection upon his influence and teaching. If a doubtful example is set, don't you think, by those in authority, those to whom we naturally look up for guidance, the effect upon many minds can hardly fail to be very sad?—No—you must excuse me, dear Mrs. Mackinder, but I cannot but think that, even though Imogen may have acted impulsively and been a little carried away by feeling, the expression to which you take exception—great provocation, I mean—is not really misplaced."

During the progress of this lengthy discourse, Mrs. Mackinder displayed signs of growing impatience; and more than once—to Waterhouse's lively entertainment—made efforts to intervene. But unsuccessfully. The silky voice became a little more rapid, a little more insistent—that was all. At this point, however, flesh and blood—specially Baillie of Blairgovan blood—could endure no longer. Mrs. Mackinder lowered her lorgnette, opened her parasol and rose from her chair.

"Yes—I am going to walk about."

This to Waterhouse, who, as in duty bound, had risen too. Then she turned upon her adversary.

"I regret that I cannot agree with you," she said. "And you must pardon my adding, Mrs. Gardiner, that in my opinion you incur very grave responsibility by encouraging Imogen Hobday in the attachment of which you speak.—The word is yours, not mine. I should be inclined to substitute the expression, presumptuous infatuation—for, personally, I cannot conceive a more unsuitable match. Out of the question, simply out of the question—age, position and—well—antecedents, to

put the thing mildly, absolutely against it.—Let us walk, my dear Colonel," she concluded, and turned away.

Waterhouse prepared to follow, gallantly obedient.—He was a trifle disappointed. He had counted on the ladies fighting to a finish; and, for all Mrs. Mackinder's grand manner, this struck him as suspiciously like a draw. But here once again Mrs. Gardiner's silky accents, fluttered by excitement, caressed his ear.

"It is unusual, is it not, for the Commissioner to attend these pleasant meetings at the club?"

"An unheard-of thing, my dear madam. Our humble sports and pastimes are unworthy such exalted patronage—but why do you ask?"

"Do you not see—there, in front of the bandstand? Young Mr. Lugard is with him too, and poor little Damaris!"

As she spoke Mrs. Gardiner hastened on, overtaking Mrs. Mackinder. The latter had paused, awaiting Waterhouse, and now stood looking in the direction indicated with unfeigned surprise.

In clear strong sunshine and equally clear strong shadow the white dome glistened against spires of cypress and shining foliage of orange trees—fragrant with blossom—which marked the angle where canal and cross alley met. Beneath it, in the spaces between the light supporting columns, brass instruments glittered and the regimental tunics of the bandsmen made a blotting of scarlet. The circular paved space surrounding the bandstand was set out with groups of brilliant coloured flowers—zinnias, marigolds, roses—in pots. And here, unmistakable in build and height, Colonel Verity stood, holding the slender little girl by the hand, attended by Lugard—three figures arrestingly individual, definite, and apart, but whether offering an invitation or challenge to the rest of the company present—scattered about the lawn, sauntering in the alleys, occupying the row of chairs in the shadow of the club house—it would be difficult to determine.

"Poor little mite," Mrs. Gardiner continued, moved by this effect of solitude and aloofness, or—more probably—by instincts of social diplomacy and self-advancement. "Poor little mite, one cannot but feel, don't you think, how much she needs the companionship of little ones of her own age? Recently Mr. Gardiner and I have not quite seen our way to doing so, but now I shall be quite willing to let my Monica and Cyril spend afternoons again and play with her at the Sultan-i-bagh. As he is here, do not you think, perhaps, it might be well for me to take the opportunity of mentioning the subject to the Commissioner at once?"

Was it a draw after all? Colonel Waterhouse found himself agreeably in doubt. For surely the fixed smile had a gleam of victory in it. Yet, as he observed, the speaker was careful not to tempt fate by waiting for a reply, but retired with notable expedition from her adversary's near neighbourhood.

Halfway across the lawn, she stopped to address Imogen Hobday, who with Mrs. Hermon Helder and Captain Dewsbery had been watching the croquet players. And it was in company with that young lady she subsequently continued her advance upon the bandstand.

Mrs. Mackinder looked at Colonel Waterhouse.

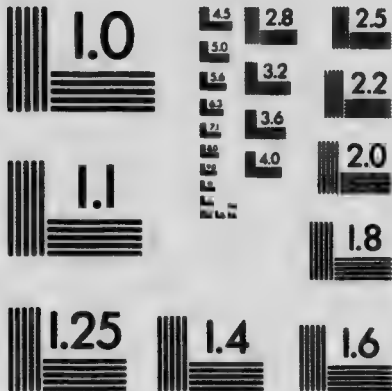
"Upon my word," she said, "I begin to think it is about time the Judge took his pension and we went home for good."

"No—no—damme—not as bad as that, dear lady—not as bad as that," Waterhouse returned feelingly. "Deliver a counter stroke by coming with me to offer Verity an official welcome to the club."



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II

COLONEL VERITY'S unlooked-for arrival, while thus producing a sensation amongst his acquaintance, took its rise in a family event simple to the point of pathos. To-day was Damaris' sixth birthday. In honour thereof, she breakfasted and had luncheon downstairs. But this seemed insufficient celebration. Further entertainment should be provided, in which, moreover, if her anxious little soul was to be satisfied, her father must take part.

Violent experiences, even in early childhood, stultify or stimulate in exact proportion to the reserve force of whoso is subjected to them. In the last few weeks Damaris had loved and suffered beyond the customary capacity of her age, yet she was by no means thereby bankrupted. On the contrary, development went forward in her nature and intelligence, the growing pains of which were not, it must be owned, pleasing in their immediate result. For she was moody, arrogant, capricious, and disconcertingly unamenable to nursery discipline—even of the mildest. Remonstrance begot storms of anger and of tears, before which Sarah Watson quailed, resourceless and alarmed, and Tulsi, weeping, fled. Upstairs, indeed, save in sleep—and mercifully for all concerned she slept much, tired out by her own emotions—Damaris, at the period in question, is best described as a little demon, sombre, lovely and incalculably restless, driven by a perpetual craving of escape from the nursery and the vicinity of the great square corner room next door.

That room, in truth, represented to her the heart of the whole matter, the provoking source and cause of the growing pains from which she suffered. Once more, by order, it had been closed, locked and shuttered, all and sundry being forbidden entrance. The thought of it and of this prohibition, the locked doors and shuttered windows, haunted her imagination as might the hidden presence of something, or someone, dead. Before Henrietta Pereira's coming, far back as memory carried, it had been to her a place apart, mysteriously fascinating to her curiosity. During Henrietta's sojourn, she knew it as delicious, a place rich in happiness beyond the dreams of avarice. Then, for one dreadful morning, swept by desolation, she knew it as a place of outer darkness and unimagined woe. Now, once more, it had passed back into mystery, yet of another order, no longer fascinating to her curiosity. For this second mystery was not that of the Unknown—furtive, airy, intangible, half panic and half play—but the far deeper and more awful mystery of the Known, of things actually seen, actually heard and felt, which still remain incomprehensible, defying reason, abrogating law.

It was beyond the scope of Damaris' mind to analyse or range the drama of her recent experience coherently. But the substance of that which she had endured and witnessed existed as a series of apprehensions and images indelibly stamped upon her consciousness. Above all was the climax of the drama present to her—the amazing moments when, restraint, pride, dignities of character and position giving way, Charles Verity had raged up and down the dimly lit room, a primitive savage. Yet, out of that very climax—touching bottom by the apparent destruction of all she trusted in and venerated, by this fall of a being to her god-like, wonderful, immutable as the sun in heaven—the process of reconstruction began. For, in the midst of her amazement, she grasped the fact that he too suffered, and through suffering ran thus mad.

Pity, dim instincts of motherhood even, stirred in her, so that when, at last, coming to himself, Charles Verity took her in his arms, her whole being dissolved in a love before which remembrance of Henrietta, grief for the loss of Henrietta, grew for the moment pale. Henrietta stood for enchantment of the senses—innocent yet of the earth only—for dainty pleasures, frisky delights shot through with laughter, a revelation of the gaiety of life. But this stricken godhead, fallen from its high estate, then miraculously restored to wholeness and to power, stood for things immeasurably more august, binding her to it, soul and intellect, with consuming tenderness and necessity of worship.

Across her father's passing lapse the child drew a curtain of silence. That was a secret, sacred and terrible, which none but she must ever penetrate. She had an instinct of shielding, of protecting, him both from the observation of others and from himself. And, to that end, she craved to be with him always; always to have him within security of sight and touch. Away from him she knew no content. Away from him, too, the ache of Henrietta's absence waxed sharp, so that she flitted, a sad and restless little figure, about the galleries and verandahs of the great house, careless of her dolls, her toys, her elaborate games and improvisations, vainly seeking a lost good.

In this manner were Sarah Watson's unruly prayers answered—as unruly prayer so often is answered—according to the letter only, and with ironic result. The poor woman had prayed Mrs. Pereira's influence might be removed, and Mrs. Pereira herself sent packing before Damaris' heart was altogether stolen away or Charles Verity's name and honour smirched. And behold, the situation was apparently saved! Softly and swiftly Henrietta departed. Yet her, Sarah Watson's, own position seemed there but little amended. Damaris was alienated from her still, was naughty, without affection, rebellious. The woman's old wounds bled afresh,

the dear bond of her vicarious motherhood being, as she believed, severed, the sweet dependence of nursing on nurse gone beyond recall. With Colonel Verity, her sometime saviour, she had moreover fallen, as she feared, into permanent disgrace. His manner was autocratic, he looked at without appearing to see her. He had not forgiven her intrusion into Hockless' sick-room; and remembrance of his stern dismissal oppressed her like a curse. It followed that her days were lonely and bitter, her nights wakeful from mental distress. The power of prayer left her, and her gloomy religion darkened to the confines of spiritual despair where, in vision, hell yawns for the rejected soul.

Her settled melancholy reacted upon Damaris, widening the existing breach, and making the child increasingly antagonistic and impatient of her presence.

"Nannie's all cross and stupid," she confided to Mildred Felicia, on that same birthday morning, in the western verandah—the gift of a dolls' china dinner-service from Mrs. Mackinder and consequent obligation of "having a party" promoting the discarded favourite to temporary favour. "Nannie doesn't never seem pleased now, so I doesn't try to be good to her. I'm always good when I'se here downstairs. But Nannie never gives me no 'couragements.'"

Later in the day, when the afternoon drive to Chandra Devas Fort was in question, she pleaded as a special treat to be taken somewhere to hear "musics." Where-upon Lugard, upon being consulted as to local possibilities of such diversion, recalled the fact that a regimental band was due to play in the club grounds during the finals of the croquet tournament.

"I'm afraid you'd find it all the bore in the world, sir," he said. "Though, of course, everybody would be awfully gratified to have you look in. Your going would be no end of a lift to the club."

'So be it then, since Damaris must have her 'musics.'

About a lift to the club, I am sceptical, Maurice—but let that pass.”

And Lugard had glanced rather wistfully at the speaker ; for he could not get the hang, as he put it, of the chief's attitude just now. Ostensibly the old order, the exclusively masculine and official reign, was re-established at the Sultan-i-bagh ; the feminine Pereira episode having vanished like so much smoke, leaving no trace. Silence had closed down on it. Hockless had received no reprimand, let alone receiving his sailing orders ; but grumbled and blundered on, keeping whatever embers of resentment or of love might still glow within his breast strictly out of sight and speech. Towards Lugard, Colonel Verity behaved with uniform courtesy and gentleness even. Intercourse with him had never moved on happier or more intimate lines. Maurice ceased to bother himself with ethics of Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad, being held captive by the immediate charm and magnetism of the elder man. Nevertheless, somehow he distrusted this calm and apparently peaceful surface. Beneath it he seemed to detect a spirit of anxiety, of strain and unrest, which, to his seeing, found their daily, almost hourly, embodiment in the slender, fitting figure of Damaris.

The little girl was admirably self-contained and serious ; but her personality pervaded the spacious Oriental house. She was for ever at hand, for ever on the watch ; for ever possessed, as it struck him, by one purpose, one train of thought, of which her father was the object. And this seemed to him slightly unnatural, as though she overstepped the bounds of her infant condition and was wise with a wisdom altogether outside her age and sphere. He found it singularly disquieting, as bearing of some obscure and indefinable relation to other queer, unaccountable manifestations which had troubled him of late.

III

THE novelty of her surroundings went a little to Damaris' head. She made earnest efforts to behave in a composed grown-up manner, suitable to the dignities of the occasion. But her heart beat quickly and her senses were fluttered by the brave strains of music, the brilliant colours, and, above all, by the line of fountain jets along the centre of the marble-lipped canal. These last fairly entranced her, as the spray of them glittered, prismatic, in the sunshine; and falling drops dimpled the surface of the water, breaking up and quaintly distorting the reflections of dark cypress spires, white blossom and glistening foliage of orange trees, the red of the graceful sandstone pavilion and hot pale blue of the all-covering Indian sky.

Many persons came and spoke to her father. First Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Hobday. Later Mrs. Mackinder—whom she did remember to thank very nicely for the dolls' dinner-service—her friend Colonel Waterhouse, Mrs. Fulleylove in timid attendance upon her explosive and gouty General, and quite a number more. They were all very polite. Some made kind speeches to her. Some went so far as to kiss her, to—with the exception of Mrs. Mackinder—her considerable distaste. Dr. McCabe said: "Well, and how are we to-day, little missy?" which she thought rather silly. And General Fulleylove tweaked her ear, which filled her with offence and disgust. Yet, even under this last and most flagrant impertinence, she

strove valiantly to maintain a calm and grown-up demeanour. The honour due to her father, let alone her own self-respect, demanded that much of her. At the same time she did her best, notwithstanding the impending palisade of ladies' crinolines and gentlemen's trouser-legs encompassing her, to keep the entrancing fountains in sight, and, above the confused noise of sonorous masculine and high-pitched feminine voices, to follow the sweep and rhythm of the band. They all meant well, no doubt; but she heartily wished these talkative people would find something more useful to do than just "'sturve" her, and interfere with her and her "thinkings"—which "thinkings" were, after all, the very essence and object of her birthday treat.

Glancing up at her father, from beneath the flapping brim of her white Leghorn hat, she fancied he, to a great extent, shared her feelings and could willingly have dispensed with the attentions lavished upon him. For his eyes were half closed, and his lips had a contemptuous line to them under his drooping moustache. He didn't, she hence concluded, enjoy being "'sturved in his thinkings" any more than she did herself.

Whereupon she pulled gently at his hand, trying to draw him out of the throng in the direction of the flagged pathway beside the canal, across the riped grey squirrels scampered, and whereon a pair of hoopoes—yellow and black crests erect, yellow and black tails spread—carried on, in sprightly courtship. But just as, feeling the pulling of the small hand within his, her father was about to bend down and ask her wishes, she observed his face change, and a light—unknown before, unknown since the halcyon days of Henrietta Pereira's visit—play over it.

Up the broad alley, leading from the club house, came a man in sun-helmet, riding boots, white breeches and short jacket, preceded by one of the scarlet-and-gold-coated Sultan-i-bagh chuprassies. He was very tall and

rather loosely made, his knees somewhat bent in walking, as of one who spends many hours in the saddle. And, as he drew near, Damaris perceived his face was so tanned by sun and exposure that his golden-brown moustache showed fairer than his skin. His features were short and square, his eyes of an extraordinarily clear bright blue. His expression was kind, slightly amused, absolutely without self-consciousness. In one hand he carried a short silver-topped rattan, in the other a little sandalwood box.

And upon this little box Damaris' attention fixed itself with a singular interest. A spasm of excitement indeed passed through her. She knew the little box contained some precious thing of intimate importance to her own little self.

"Henrietta," she murmured, instinctively under her breath. "Oh! Henrietta."

And with that she had hard work to wink away the tears which blurred her sight.

Her father let go of her hand.

"What wind of God blows you, of all men, hither, Carteret?" she heard him ask, an odd vibration in his voice.

Whereupon the blue-eyed man answered with a quiet laugh:

"A wind from beyond the mountains of the far North-West. But whether a holy wind, or one of quite another sort, it is for you to judge. I am merely the messenger."

And, without more ado, he slipped his arm within Colonel Verity's and led him away down the alley on the left, through the clear purple shadows of the cypress and orange grove, speaking low and rapidly, leaning against his shoulder as they walked.

Damaris watched their going with a thrill of admiration and of longing, which nearly brought the tears again. For they seemed to her beautiful and wonderful, loving, too, in noble fashion, as they walked, thus, in close and earnest converse. She sighed, as she looked at them; and then,

for the first time discovered she was alone here among the pots of zinnias, and marigolds, and roses set out on the paved space in front of the bandstand. The crowd of neighbours and acquaintances had broken up, melting away before the coming of this stranger, sauntering back to the croquet lawns, back to tea at the club house by common consent. Even Lugard was gone. She could see him in the distance strolling, with Mrs. Mackinder, towards the row of chairs placed just below the verandah.

The child felt a little surprised at her solitude; but neither frightened nor injured. For her father and the blue-eyed man, carrying the precious little box—her own little box!—would very certainly come back all in good time. She had absolute faith in their return. And, meanwhile, here was an opportunity, dared she embrace it, to make nearer inspection of the captivating fountain jets, of Parbati's scampering squirrels and the sprightly hoopoes with their feather crowns of ebony and gold.

She started soberly enough, lest anyone should observe and stop her; but, once the bandstand rounded, ran her lightest and fleetest—hat-brim flapping, short full muslin skirts and sash ribbons flying, the soft brown cloud of her hair borne upward from her shoulders—till the raised flagged pathway was reached. On one side was the water and its wavering reflections, on the other flowing flower borders; while, closing the bright perspective, the cupolas of the red pavilion—set on its red platform—rose against the sky. Now she walked soberly again, her hands clasped, listening to the delicate splash and tinkle of the falling water, watching its airy, ever-changing forms in an ecstasy of delight. The sound of the band grew faint, that of voices thin and far away. There was nothing, no one, here, to check the play of her imagination; for the white-clad bare-legged *mali*, pottering with rake and broom among the flower beds, disturbed her fancies no more than the flights of emerald-green parrots chasing one another, screaming, overhead. So she wandered on

losing, by degrees, sense of her own individuality in a maze of transmigrations, becoming part and parcel of all she looked on—birds, trees, flowers, clear glittering water and all-encompassing ether—she herself poet and poem in one.

Presently a second element declared itself. For not the ecstasy of immediate enjoyment alone, but ambition of adventure led her forward, the high raised terrace becoming her goal. She longed to find herself above the garden and its masses of foliage, above the people, above even the delectable canal and fountains, to gaze down upon all these as from a throne.

To this end she climbed bravely, laboriously, flushed and panting, up the high steep steps leading to the sandstone platform. Halfway along it, two or three yards back from the verge, a black marble footstool was set in front of an ancient black marble chair. Here stood the desired throne ready for her occupation! Damaris hesitated finding its sombre colour somewhat forbidding, but only for a little while. With a lift of her head, and all the grandeur of manner she could command, she walked across the red pavement—not without nervousness of centipedes or other evil creeping things—and with a final effort, still flushed and breathless, clambered up from the footstool on to the seat of the big, black marble chair.

Heat rose off the sun-baked stones; and with it rich scent of flowers and spices, which—along with the emotion of her solitary pilgrimage and the exertion of her climb—made her giddy and even slightly faint. But these disagreeable sensations soon passed away; and she sat in all the pride of audacious achievement, looking at the grounds, which with their moving figures, lawns, alleys and buildings lay like a bright-painted map below. Beyond the limits of them she could see the long green line of the tamarind avenue, the pale outstretch of the Maidan away to the blood-red walls of the native city; and, on her extreme left, the ochre-coloured mass of the

Sultan-i-bagh showing amir/ its high palms and garden trees.

The late afternoon sun beat hot on her. She drew her feet up on to the marble seat, arranged her petticoats neatly. Dozed, and roused herself with a start, to feel lonely for a moment, almost frightened. But sight of the *mali's* bare brown legs and white-habited back, as he bent double over the flower borders, beside the canal path, reassured her. There wasn't anything really to be afraid of, and it was grand, and cosy too, to sit curled up in this great chair and rest. Wherefore gradually, and without further effort of resistance, she let slip her hold on consciousness, exchanging by imperceptible degrees waking phantasies for the hardly more extravagant phantasies of sleep.

And presently, interwoven with these, it seemed by no means strange or unexpected to hear the blue-eyed man's quiet laugh; or to see him stride across the terrace, in the now slanting and golden sunlight, and drop on one knee, upon the black marble footstool before her, bringing his face on to a level with hers. For he inspired her with very pleasant confidence. Hadn't she been comfortably certain all along, he would come back?—Nor did it appear to her in any way a breach of good manners to say to him without preamble, straight out:

"And now you've finished talking to the Commissioner Sahib, won't you show me, please, what's in my darling little box?"

"Your darling little box, indeed, you small witch," he said, in a charming teasing fashion, which made her laugh softly too. "How the mischief do you know it belongs to you?"

"'Cause this is my birthday and 'cause I was sure, all inside of me, it was a present for me d'reckly I saw it."

"You were, were you? Well, let us test this remarkable gift of divination a little further. I give you three guesses. Who sent you the box?"

Damaris' laughter died. She grew very serious, tremulous even, shaken by the sense of powers unrealized till now, at which she felt alarmed and which she did not understand.

"May I touch it, please?" she said. "I won't tempt to open it till you tell me I can."

Captain Carter—formerly Colonel Verity's brother-in-arms and now, for some years, noted member of the Indian Secret Service—held out the sandalwood box, watching the child with considerable curiosity. For his vision was not limited to what is obvious, probable and familiar. It ranged out into those secular and traditional, though still uncharted regions, where matter—things inanimate—appears responsive, dominated by the action of the human mind and will. Just that element in Damaris which repulsed Lugard attracted him. And now, as her fingers first ran over the surface of the box and then dwelt carefully, even reverently, upon it, with keen interest he observed her turn very pale, her mouth quiver and her solemn eyes grow wet.

"Henrietta," she whispered. "I sort of knew it was from Henrietta."

She leaned back. Her hands dropped languidly in her lap.

"Then," she said, with a sigh, "Henrietta didn't really never forget."

"Oh, no!" Carteret returned, surprised and slightly puzzled. "You may take it from me, small witch, Mrs. Pereira has a capital good memory. She is not at all the sort of person who forgets."

"Then why——?" Damaris began to reason. But she checked herself. Secrets must be kept. "I mean, please, when did you see Henrietta?" she asked.

Again he laughed.

"Oh! most surprising babe of a thousand years, I tremble to think 'what you'll be at forty if heaven keeps you alive,' if you are such a practised diplomatist at only

six ! When I want somebody to take over my job, I shall know where to look for a successor.—Here are the facts, then. I saw Mrs. Pereira the night before last, and happening to mention, in the course of conversation, that business might take me to Bhutpur, she begged me to bring this to you for your birthday, with her love, as she thought it would journey more safely by hand than by post. You see, her sending it to you was no sudden thought just because she heard I was coming here. You would have had your present in any case, though its arrival might have been delayed. You quite understand ? ”

“ Yes,” Damaris said, looking him steadily in the eyes. “ I quite understand, thank you, and I am so beautiful glad.”

Carteret rose from his knees, an odd expression in his face and stood a moment silent. For she was a rather astonishing little being, this daughter of Charles Verity's ; as distinct a personality as Charles Verity himself, and how strangely like him in manner and in features ! And what, he further asked himself, lay behind this matter of Mrs. Pereira—the child's quaintly lover-like attitude, and equally quaint and almost uncanny reticence and self-restraint ? Heaven forbid he should pry into the hidden places of his dearest friend's life—all the same, was he by chance up against some big romance, explanatory of much ? He always feared Verity's marriage had not proved quite satisfactory somehow ; and he knew Verity had been a good deal smitten by Mrs. Pereira—Mrs. Chauncy Adams as she then was—when the regiment was quartered at Poonah years ago.—He'd been a good deal smitten himself, if it came to that, and was fond enough of her still to regard her present husband as a lamentably rank outsider.—But Mrs. Pereira as heroine of a grand passion, as the inspirer of supreme devotion, and in such a man as Charles Verity, was an idea altogether new to him. How marvellous are the vagaries of the

human heart—for very surely she did not amount, never could amount, to that !

He looked at Charles Verity's solemn-eyed child once more.

" So you're beautiful glad, are you ? " he said gently. " I'm glad too, then, and I enjoy being glad. It's a first-class occupation.—But don't you want to open this and see what's inside it ?—Yes, if you could manage to make room for me there, we'd look inside together."

He sat down beside her in the great black marble chair ; and, slipping back the lid, put the sandalwood box in her lap.

But the mingled excitements of suspense and of possession were too much for Damaris, and her hands shook so that she was unable to unwrap the soft scented papers covering the object within.

" Here, better leave it to me, or we may be let in for an accident," Carteret said. While, under his lean skilful fingers, from out the scented wrappings emerged a green jade elephant, with crystal tusks and ruby eyes, about three inches high.

Damaris gave a long-drawn " Oh ! "—looked at the small stone idolon in speechless rapture ; kissed it, and pressed it tenderly against the bosom of her muslin frock, rocking herself gently to and fro.

" You like it so very much ? " Carteret asked, touched but again puzzled by the child's intensity of emotion.

" Yes," she answered. " It's beautiful pretty—and it's Henrietta what thought of me and sent it, you see."

" Yes," he said—" exactly—of course, I do see."

Then he sprang to his feet, and waved his hand, calling.

" Hullo, Verity—I've tracked her. She's here safe enough."

And Damaris beheld her father and Lugard walking so rapidly, that they came very near running, along the flagged path by the canal below. A thought struck her.

She stood up on the seat of the chair and pulled at Carteret's sleeve.

"Quick, oh! please, quick," she cried, "'fore he comes. Does the Commissioner Sahib know who sent me my little elephant?"

"Yes," Carteret said—"I told him it was a birthday present from Mrs. Pereira."

"Does he mind?—'Cause, if he does, I—I'd give it up, I wouldn't keep it—if he minded."

"Why should he mind?" Carteret asked, pushed by curiosity to fathom the enigma. But he repented swiftly. For was it not a wicked thing to tax this baby's loyalty and trade on her helplessness? "No—no—don't tell me why, dear small witch—I don't want to know. But, set your heart at rest. You are free to keep your little elephant. He doesn't mind—of course, he doesn't mind the least bit."

Which approached a lie, as he now very shrewdly suspected; yet without scruple he told it—for the child's sake.

IV

SUCH was the beginning of the cult of the green jade elephant; which, in its earlier stages, proved altogether beneficent, making, even upstairs in the nursery, for a state of grace.

The smart of Damaris' sorrow was assuaged now she found Henrietta Pereira still remembered her; found Henrietta was still actually in being, moreover, and accessible to human intercourse. She no longer felt bereft and desolate; no longer tempted to flit, in unreasoning restlessness, about the great house, vainly seeking a lost good.

The blue-eyed man, on this occasion, she did not see again. For the excitements of her birthday and that doubtfully wholesome sleep on the red terrace in the afternoon sunshine, had been enervating, leaving her languid and averse to exertion. She pleaded for breakfast in bed; and stayed there contentedly playing with her little elephant, a really model child—in Sarah Watson's opinion, indeed, almost dangerously tractable and good. So that by the time she, at last, consented to be bathed and dressed, the blue-eyed man had long since taken his departure. Thus, to her mind, did he pass into legend, appearing as some heaven-sent messenger, more than mortal who, without material mode of transport, went she knew not whither, came she knew not whence; but brought happiness along with him and left blessing behind in the delectable form of small green jade elephants.

She felt far safer about her father, too, now she knew he possessed the blue-eyed man as his friend. A mighty weight was lifted from off her spirit. She could go back to comfortable baby ways again ; and, laying aside cares of state, find entertainment in persecution of that long-suffering animal, Jessie, the fox terrier, and in telling new and interminable stories to her dolls, to which music, fountains, and gleaming marble-lipped canals lent fine spectacular effects. For in memory she beheld the light upon Charles Verity's face, beheld him and his friend, walking through the shadow of the cypress and orange grove in close and loving converse, and, so doing, knew her responsibilities were shared.

"When things happens I shall send for Carteret Sahib. You will go and fetch him d'reckly minute," sae told the little elephant, whose ruby eyes twinkled with the most reassuring intelligence.

He understood every word she said to him—there could be no shadow of doubt about that.—All of which, had any learned person been at hand to take notes, unquestionably offered a telling object-lesson in primitive psychology and the evolution of idol worship.

Thanks to the cynical turn so frequently observable in human affairs, none—save Damaris herself—profited more by this cult of a graven image than Sarah Watson, puritan and born iconoclast. It went sorely against her moral and religious sense to witness the child's infatuation. Yet precisely in proportion as Damaris—soothed by Henrietta's birthday gift—became normally docile and affectionate, did hell cease to yawn for Sarah Watson's tormented soul and the power of prayer return to her. She tried vainly to blind herself to this humiliating sequence of cause and effect ; and ended, with pathetic inconsistency, by praying at one moment for strength to scold the child out of inordinate love of her new toy, and the next giving thanks that such strength was denied her !

Meanwhile, although to Damaris the blue-eyed man's

visit had brought happiness, to her father it had brought considerable searching of heart. For Carteret was the bearer of secret information, from beyond the frontier, which touched him nearly. Again the offer of a high command was made him from Cabul. If he chose to accept it, honours and power awaited him of a sort flattering to his ambition and to his native pride.

And that offer showed the more alluring because depression and a sense of failure lay black upon his soul. The investigations consequent upon young Clatworthy's murder revealed a state of unrest, of smouldering revolt, not only in Kankarpur, but other quarters. Bhutpur itself had not altogether escaped infection. The discovery had been made in time for effective measures of repression to be taken. Still Charles Verity suffered discouragement, asking himself whether the work of years was not invalidated, remaining to be done all over again.—This was as gall and wormwood to him; and, whatever the eventual upshot, must constitute a sorry page in the history of his administration. For effectually to stamp out sedition, to sterilize efforts of revolt, he must adopt somewhat merciless methods. That meant adverse criticism, ignorant or malevolent attack on the one hand, and explanation, self-justification on his own, such as he loathed. Should he renounce this mock sovereignty of an Indian official, fling it aside once and for all and seek fortune in a land where sovereignty is absolute, a land ruled not by compromise, by concession and persuasion so dear to the Western humanitarian conscience; but solely by the sword?

"They want your decision soon," Carteret told him. "Things in general are in the melting-pot Afghanistan. You can have whatever you choose to: for, Verity. But time presses."

"Things in general—for my sins—are in the melting-pot here too," he answered. "It is obvious I cannot run away. I must have a month in which to evolve order

out of chaos—and, incidentally, to know my own mind."

And at that the question rested ; when Mrs. Gardiner, joining hands with destiny, made an unexpected contribution to the hastening of events.

V

IT fell out thus. True to her charitable purpose of brightening Damaris' life, the Chaplain's wife, one burning afternoon in May, dispatched Monica and Cyril—duly attended by ayah and bearer—in a closed hired gharry, to spend some hours in the happily no longer contaminated atmosphere of the Sultan-i-bagh. Colonel Verity had offered to send the young visitors home. But this honour Mrs. Gardiner refused, with profuse expressions of gratitude. She could not think of allowing the Commissioner to have out one of his carriages on their account. No, she would, with his permission, call for the children herself; for Miss Hobday had most kindly offered to take her to the Sultan-i-bagh and drive her and the "little ones" home in her pony-cart. So thoughtful of Miss Hobday, wasn't it? The servants, of course, could walk.

Childhood, as a whole, is admittedly sacred—and rightly so. Yet individual children fail to please, are indeed, not infrequently odious; and the little Gardiners were not among the elect of the infant species. Flaxen-haired, puny and anæmic, victims of climate and of a mongrel upbringing—half Anglo-clerical, half Oriental low-caste—they had not, let it be owned, had much chance. To Damaris' fastidious eyes, and nose, they seemed of doubtful personal cleanliness; while the fastenings of their under-garments behaved in a manner demanding reiterated attentions from their ayah, in respect of "buttoning up." So far as duties of hospitality permitted,

Damaris avoided close contact with her guests, and it was not without a movement of distaste she beheld them pull about her dolls and toys.

At first the size and dignity of the rooms and corridors—cool, though dim and airless, outer doors and windows being closed against the heat—the numbers of servants, and the apparently inexhaustible amount of Damaris' possessions, let alone their parents' admonitions at starting, kept them in a subdued and even servile state of mind. But, as time wore on, familiarity, according to its habit in mean natures, bred contempt. Monica alternately reproved and whined. Cyril waxed cocky, teased and bragged. He exhibited an inconvenient inclination, further, to appropriate any small objects which attracted his fancy and bestow them within the front of his blue cotton tunic, which soon bulged, over the restraining waistbelt, in a very odd manner. Sarah Watson observed this increasing protuberance with increasing dismay, foreseeing an awkward process of disembowelling before the little boy went home.

Matters, however, proceeded fairly amicably until after tea, when, the house being opened again, Watson, followed at a respectful distance by Tuisi and the Gardiner ayah, conveyed the trio downstairs to play on the east verandah. And here catastrophe, swift but irremediable, befell.

Colonel Verity had given orders to be warned of Mrs. Gardiner's arrival. He did not covet the society of this long-tongued lady, but neither did he choose to fail in courtesy towards her. Supported by Lugard, he met her and Imogen Hobday in the hall; and—to her vast satisfaction—went with them into the drawing-room.

There Mrs. Gardiner broke forth into adulatory speech.

"Living in our own quiet home," she said, after a word as to the behaviour of the children, "I feel it a privilege for my little ones to pass an hour or two here sometimes, Colonel Verity. Early impressions are so valuable—do you not feel—in forming the mind; and so much instruction

as well as enjoyment, may be derived from the society of those whose position and income are superior to one's own. I always strive to teach my Monica and Cyril to admire without envy. Both Mr. Gardiner and I so feel the importance of a sound moral groundwork in the education of our little ones. The laying of foundations cannot surely begin too soon."

But before Colonel Verity had time to frame any apposite platitude in reply, she directed her fixed smile upon Lugard with a question concerning Hockless' recovery from his attack of fever, observations upon attacks of fever in general and the best methods of combating them. Talking, she strolled towards one of the long windows standing open on to the verandah, compelling the young man to advance alongside her. Then she fell into admiration of the garden, contrasting its extent and luxuriance with the circumscribed and arid compound of the clerical bungalow. While so doing, she cast pale glances upon the other occupants of the drawing-room and congratulated herself; for her move, carefully planned and adroitly executed, had, she perceived, succeeded in its purpose—namely that of leaving her host and her *protégée*, Imogen Hobday, face to face. Words, therefore, flowed from between her teeth as water from between the cross-bars of a sieve; while Lugard listened, mesmerized by the persistence of her speech to the point of being helpless to create any diversion.

And Charles Verity, stranded thus opposite Imogen Hobday, found himself, for cause unknown, observant of, sensible of, that young lady as very certainly never before. He had seen her frequently, talked to her in passing, now and again; but, save on the morning of his return from Kankarpur when her pony bolted in the tamarind avenue, had seldom, if ever, given her existence a serious thought. She was outside his orbit—a stock property, and he owned a handsome one, of the Bhutpur social stage; but, in his estimation, nothing more. Nor was her

connection, though purely fortuitous and accidental, with that morning of high promise, cruel disillusion and balked desire—the after-famine of which tormented him even yet—calculated to make her welcome in his sight. He had regarded her coming as a nuisance, the endurance of which with decent civility touched the limit of his obligation towards her.

Yet now, as Mrs. Gardiner and Lugard withdrew, leaving him practically alone with her, he became conscious of tension, of an atmosphere indeed charged with strong emotion.

The girl did not speak, but stood looking at him, her full amorous lips pouting, her brilliant eyes lit with passion which she made no effort to disguise. Her rounded bosom rose and fell under the thin bodice of her white muslin dress, and her fine nostrils quivered as she breathed. As long ago, in the grey English winter by the sad unrestful Channel sea, he had read in Lesbia Faircloth's grave countenance the perilous news he was free to take of her what he would, so now and here—older by sixteen years of power and wide-reaching experience of men and of affairs—he read the same perilous news on the countenance of this girl, his uninvited and casual guest.

A revelation startling as it was unexpected, and one which Charles Verity would, doubtless, have been wiser to put from him with immediate and unqualified rejection. But it was not in his nature to do this. Untouched, a little scornful, he still was sufficiently interested to examine, and appraise. He permitted himself to study Imogen—taking stock of her superb colouring and physique, the redeeming slenderness of her waist, her hands and feet; and to note, consciously if self-contemptuously, the fervid voluptuous expectancy of her expression and her pose.

A pause of some inflammatory seconds followed, during which her aspect remained unchanged—then he asked calmly, rather cruelly:

“ You were going to tell me. Miss Hobday ? ”

The girl's attitude relaxed, while a flush came over her neck and face, dulling the lustre of her complexion and brilliancy of her eyes.

"Nothing," she answered sullenly. "What do you mean? What should I have to tell you, Colonel Verity?—Are you laughing at me? And it's mean, it's ungenerous, not gentlemanlike to laugh, when you know I can't help myself."

She flung away from him, clenching her hand and striking it against her forehead.

"Don't laugh at me, don't laugh!" she repeated in a voice thick with emotion. "Do what you like with me, say what you like. Drive me away even as she—that Pereira woman—drove me away, only don't laugh at me. Don't."

But here wild hubbub arose. Shrill cries of infant fear and pain resounded through the arcade without.

Lugard hurried forward in time to collide with, and seize, little Cyril Gardiner, who ran squealing into his arms round the angle of the house.

"Mamma, mamma," he cried, "give her bat-bat. She's pulled out my hair—oh! oh!—she hurt me. She pulled my hair out."

And there followed a string of obscenities in Hindustani, which made the young man clap his hand sharply over the child's mouth.

"Stop that, you dirty little beast," he said, under his breath, "or you'll get bat-bat to some purpose yourself, I jolly well promise you."

Then Mrs. Gardiner followed by Colonel Verity entered upon the scene; while, from the opposite direction, Monica advanced, tearful yet strong in conscious virtue, clinging to the hand of her distracted ayah.

"I can explain, mamma," she sobbed. "I saw her do it. She is a wicked little girl, not fit for good children like us to play with. She beat Cyril, and pulled out his curls. Such a lot. They stuck to her fingers."

Louder advertisement of sobs.

"Please take us home, mamma. She is not a nice little gir! for us to play with. We are afraid of her. We do not wish to stay here any longer."

Charles Verity did not stop to hear more. It was not his habit to tolerate insubordination. The extraordinary revelation sprung on him by Imogen Hobday, her offensive, and to him incomprehensible, allusion to Mrs. Pereira, and now this ridiculous, unseemly quarrel between Damaris and her little guests, displeased and angered him beyond measure. He passed into the eastern verandah, his aspect magnificent but not a little awe-inspiring, there to meet someone magnificent and awe-inspiring as himself—though in miniature.

"What is the meaning of this disgraceful noise?" he asked sternly.

And Damaris, standing, keen and fierce as flame, among her scattered dolls and playthings, the sandalwood box brought her by Captain Carteret clutched against her bosom, answered him fearlessly:

"I beat Cyril Gardiner, Commissioner Sahib; I teared out all his hair I could 'cause he knocked my little effalent. He teased, till I took it out of the little box and let him see it. He promised he wouldn't touch and—and he knocked it off the table with a stick. He knocked it on purpose, 'fore Nannie could stop him."

She spread out her arms, with a sweeping gesture, worthy of some fine and practised tragedienne.

"And it's broke," she cried aloud. "Its—its darling little trunk is broke right off, and one of its tusks is all split. It's spoilt, Commissioner Sahib, spoilt, my little own, own effalent what Henrietta remembered and sent me her own self!"

And she cast herself face downwards, on the floor-matting; and lay there tearless, indifferent, inaccessible to reason, to caresses, to all comfort, in the abyss of her grief.

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BOOK VII

*THE HAND OF THE FUTURE WHICH IS ALSO
THE HAND OF THE PAST*

STEADILY the temperature rose, and, save in cessation of glare, night brought but meagre relief. All living things first sweltered ; then, the moisture drawn out of them, parched, incinerated by the relentless heat—the Sun-god claiming his yearly sacrifice of man, of vegetation, bird and beast. Earth herself refused the natural functions of motherhood, her womb for the season barren, her bosom seared and blistered, turned to shifting and infertile dust.

The garden of the Sultan-i-bagh still maintained some beauty of green leaves, thanks to the great well, the waters of which, though shrunken, still morning and evening—with much creaking of pulleys and wooden gearing, much strain and labour of cream-coloured yoke bullocks—fed the irrigating conduits and the tank. But, even so, plants and shrubs withered, grass died to the roots, and dry leaves lay thick and rustling, as in an English November, upon the alleys and the walks.

Indoors, as the number of the burning days accumulated into weeks, the atmosphere, notwithstanding the spacious proportions of the house, grew heavier and more stagnant ; and, to its British-born inhabitants, remembrance of covered skies, of wind and wet, a nerve-racking torment of longing and regret. Hockless, tossing on his bed beneath the swinging punkah, sickened for the giant elms and dew-sodden pastures of the English Midlands ; Lugard, in like conditions, for the purple Wicklow mountains

opening, in wooded glen and trout-stream, upon the mist-swept Irish Sea. Charles Verity, strained and embittered by the fierce business of rooting out sedition, found his mind hark back to his great-uncle's rambling house at Deadham Hard, to the chuckle and sob of the dark hurrying rivers, the chill land-locked mud flats, salt marsh and reed beds of Marychurch Haven, washed over with sober tones of blue, brown, lavender, dove-colour and undeterminate grey.

He suffered further vexation, of a sort happily unknown to the two younger men as yet. For, during these breathless, hot-weather nights, Lesbia Faircloth troubled his sleep strangely with craving for the freshness she carried with her, the smell of brine that clung to her clothing, the coolness of her body to his touch. Waking, tantalized and unrefreshed, thought of the fifteen-year-old boy came on him, starting the ache of a certain moral scar. Of that elder, unacknowledged child of his, he did not know, probably never would know anything.—To approach them, to seek information regarding them, would be to risk disgrace, to invite injury both to mother and to son. No, the boy was ruled out of his life by the necessities of the case. It would be a weakness, and worse, to attempt to alter that ruling.—But of Damaris, the other, younger child, acknowledged, greatly loved, he knew, in a sense, only too much just now. Anxiety concerning her pursued him, deepening day by day. So that, at times, he asked himself, what if a childless old age was in store for him? An old age, lonely and ignoble, in which the seven devils of mental and physical decay and the fatuous vices they beget in a man, would hound him down the road to the last milestone of his earthly journey—the grim last milestone which is gravestone too?

These were hardly consolatory thoughts; yet that things were very far from well with Damaris he could not deny. He reproached himself, as both foolhardy and selfish, for allowing her to remain in India so late. A year,

eighteen months ago he ought to have sent her home to England. Dr. McCabe had warned him; but he put off the decision, put off the parting. As in that hour of intimate self-revelation he told Mrs. Pereira, he dared not give the child up—she was the salt of his life, the leaven keeping him clean, temperate, his intention just and pure. Now he was haunted by dread of losing her, not temporarily by passage to Europe, but finally, irrevocably, by passage to whatever state of being lies beyond the gates of death.

Probably both he, McCabe and Watson—the latter untiring in service, the child through weakness being very effectually given back into her hands—exaggerated the gravity of Damaris' condition. Indian hot weather is prolific of forebodings and insidious fears; and, in its earlier stages at any rate, her illness was a matter of *morale* and imagination, produced by shock to overstrung sensibility rather than bodily ailment. From the date of the Gardiner children's ill-fated visit, she remained in a state of languor and listlessness from which it seemed impossible to rouse her.

"Don't 'sturve me, Nannie. I'm quite good, but I'm all tired inside of me. I don't want to do nothing but just be still," she explained, not once but many times; and fell back to silent brooding again, wide-eyed, indifferent, inaccessible to sympathy, shut away within some secret place of her own nature.

On the afternoon of the day following "the rape of the lock"—so designated, with rather malicious satisfaction, by Lugard—Colonel Verity drove out across the Maidan, and on through the narrow tortuous streets of the native city, festering in the heat, to the house of one Motiram—Hindu dealer in gold and silversmith's work, in jewels, godlings of alabaster, soapstone and brass, in embroideries and gems and shawls—bearing with him the sandalwood box containing Mrs. Pereira's birthday gift. Within the week, fat, unctuously smiling, Motiram himself appeared

on the verandah of the Sultan-i-bagh, with many florid compliments and salaams. He had mended the green jade elephant with consummate skill ; had put tiny rings of gold round the crystal tusks, tipped them with gold, too, to conceal the damage, and joined the trunk so neatly that the tragic line of cleavage was imperceptible even to a critical eye.

Damaris made a praiseworthy effort to appear pleased and to express suitable thanks. But, once upstairs out of her father's sight, she wrapped the little elephant in the soft scented papers from out which, under Carteret's kindly fingers, he had so enchantingly emerged that happy birthday afternoon on the red terrace, overlooking the fountains, orange and cypress groves of the club ; and laying him back in the sandalwood box, slid the lid of it to.

For she could not deceive herself. Her little elephant's apparent wholeness was a delusion and a lie. Now, and for ever more, he belonged to the woeful category of things mutilated and imperfect ; things crippled and consequently, to the idealist, impossible to rejoice over, impossible even—save in moments of high courage—to look upon without shrinking and inclination to tears of anger and of shame. Henceforward he called for pity rather than for worship. His glory had departed, the virtue was gone out of him. He was no more than a poor little stone image, powerless to work any sort of miracle. The beautiful game of sending him galloping off to fetch Carteret Sahib, in case of untoward events, sank to the level of a silly farce. By his breakage, Damaris' lines of communication were cut ; and not only Carteret—the friend in whom she trusted for her father's well-being—but Henrietta, to whom he had acted as envoy, was put hopelessly out of reach.

Thus did Damaris' active brain work havoc with her delicate body ; and, victim of her own imagination and heart, did she, metaphorically speaking, rend her garments and pour ashes on her small devoted head ! Her spirit was broken. In other words she suffered nervous prostra-

tion, a nervous collapse, of remarkable intensity in so young a child—inherent difficulties of diagnosis and treatment enhanced by the fact that she was dumb under her affliction, possessing neither energy nor command of language sufficient to describe her sensations and formulate her lament.

Rumour, meanwhile, buzzed. The ladies of the Station, inspired in part by genuine concern, in part—remembering the pleasing excitement of the Pereira incident—by curiosity and a lively desire to keep the Commissioner and his domestic arrangements well under observation, were profuse in inquiry, eagerly proffering suggestions and advice. Finding—with the exception of Mrs. Mackinder—however, that a chilly rejection awaited their advances, they worked off natural annoyance in unlimited talk.—“That sour-faced woman, little Damaris Verity’s nurse, was a regular tartar. That poor, washed-out looking nurse of hers was a perfect slave. Her father neglected the child. She was desperately afraid of him. You saw that from her subdued manner and unnaturally old expression. On the contrary, Colonel Verity was wretchedly weak with her, indulged her every whim, spoiled her to the top of her bent. It was a thousand pities, for she would grow up intolerably conceited, a really insufferable little prig, at this rate.”

To the latter view, though expressed in more refined language, Mrs. Gardiner inclined.

“We must always make allowances, don’t you feel? for an only child especially in an establishment where money is no object. Poor little Damaris has not a sweet nature, and there has been mismanagement. She has not been taught how wrong it is not to restrain her temper. A loving mother’s insight and fond controlling hand is sorely needed.”

“And, failing that, the controlling hand of a fond stepmother”—from Colonel Waterhouse, to whom the lady’s remarks happened to be addressed.—“The dashing

Imogen's, for instance?—Does our young lady still aspire, can you tell me, my dear madam, still cherish hope?"

"Surely you would not wish me to betray a young girl's confidences?" Mrs. Gardiner replied, with deprecating mildness; thereby, as Waterhouse owned, effectually putting him out of court.

Every morning Dr. McCabe called at the Sultan-i-bagh, with his—"Well, and how are we to-day, little missy?"

And every morning after his visit, told Colonel Verity: "It's this accursed weather that's working the mischief. Give her till the monsoon breaks, and we'll find her revive like the flowers—blossom like the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley. And then, just as soon as it's practicable, we'll have to ship her off to England. Ah! I know, I know, it'll be a wrench for you, Commissioner, a soundly nasty wrench."

But, in talking to Sarah Watson, the tender-hearted, garrulous, choleric Irishman struck a less cheerful note.

"I'm dashed if I like the looks of her at all, at all, Mrs. Watson," he said. "I've expended my experience and my medical science in its entirety upon her, and with no visible result. She ought to be well ten times over by now, and she's no better. And yet, I give you my sacred word of honour, there's actually nothing wrong with her—never has been—tongue, bowels, temperature, pulse, all very fairly normal. She's well, if we could only make her believe so, and act on it; though, all the same, she's fading away under our very noses, so to speak. Now, were she sixteen instead of six, I should know where I stood; and tell her father to bring along the handsomest young fellows he could lay hands on to see her. It's just love-sick, she is—love-sick, I tell you, as sure as my name's Dennis McCabe. And unless some of us are clever enough to rout out and produce the object of her affections, she'll slip through our fingers before ever we can get her home to England. Checkmate it'll be, I am deucedly afraid, for the lot of us, Mrs. Watson. So put on your

considering cap—see if you can't give a guess at who or what she's pining after ? "

But jealousy took Sarah Watson by the throat, choking back the name she might have spoken. Not that—not that! she cried in an agony of inward supplication. It was impossible God should require so supreme an act of self-abnegation, self-abasement from her. Morality and religion forbade it surely. Better Damaris' little life should fade out, as McCabe threatened, than that the light woman who had stolen the child's heart, and come near stealing her father's honour also, should return and prove the vehicle of her restoration.

II

SEVERAL outbreaks of fire, encouraged, though insufficiently accounted for, by the prevailing drought, occurred in the European quarter of Bhutpur at this period. This, while supplying an agreeable fillip of excitement to those whose private property was neither endangered nor consumed, proved eminently disquieting to the more responsible and experienced members of the community. For they could not but remember that the spring of 1857—year of ill-omen to the English Raj—had been marked, far and wide, by kindred outbreaks. Nor could they forget that the men accused of the murder of Clatworthy, the young Kankarpur Deputy Assistant Commissioner, were now undergoing trial; or that other persons, among them, native gentlemen of considerable local position, lay in gaol, charged with treasonable practices and attempted inciting to sedition and revolt. Might there not, only too probably, be a connection between these facts of very sinister import?

But even such frivolous persons as Kitty Hobday and Mrs. Hermon Helder, who had most cordially welcomed the enlivenment of hot-weather monotony by bonfires fed with the goods of their unhappy neighbours and friends, sobered abruptly when the news circulated, one Sunday towards midnight, that not only were the Government yards and stables, at the northern end of the Cantonments, ablaze; but that the Mackinders' pleasant bungalow and its numerous outbuildings, in the heart

of the Civil Lines, was suffering a like visitation. It the conflagration spread, which seemed far from improbable under existing weather conditions, the whole Station risked being burned out.

For the last twenty-four hours the sky had been portentous with cloud and murk. Evil winds, suddenly upspringing, raised storms of stinging suffocating dust; and sent pillars of blown sand whirling, Dervish-like, across the Maidan in intricate and fearful dance. At intervals thunder shattered and volleyed overhead. All nature seemed convulsed, struggling to free itself, stricken with insanity by the heat; but no rain fell as yet.

At the Sultan-i-bagh, standing solitary, midway between the Civil and Military Lines, night brought no sense of security or repose. For, when the thunder ceased to shudder through the solid fabric of the house, or the scorching wind failed for a while to cry through shutters and every aperture and crack of casement and of door, the unexpected silence speedily found voice, muttering and whispering furtively, watchful and malevolent. Everywhere dust had penetrated, too, blurring all polished surfaces, rendering every object harsh and gritty to the touch.

Then, as time drew on, on a sudden the whole place sprang loudly awake. Urgent messengers passed in and out, orders were given sharply, horses called for, Lugard sent off to the Mackinders', Hockless to the Government stables. The blank darkness to north and south was torn by leaping flame, while the universal oppression and uncertainty obtaining were rendered more distractingly acute by distant shoutings, the lowing of cattle, screaming of terrified horses, trumpeting of elephants.

Charles Verity went upstairs into the nursery. He crossed the room to the sofa on which Damaris lay. As Sarah Watson, who sat fanning the child, rose, he reached out his hand for the fan and silently took her place.

For a minute or so he remained looking at the little

girl. And, so doing, his face went livid, lined and aged by something more searching and vital than any anxieties caused by the responsibilities of his office, by the cares and disappointments of government, or by the nervous pressure of the heat.

He raised the child's hand, found neither response nor strength in it. Saw it fall back limply upon the sheet. Noted how the fine bones of her fingers, wrist and forearm, showed plainly through the white skin, as did those of her jaw and cheek. All sweet roundness of flesh had vanished. She had pined till only skin and bone, indeed, were left. A little more and the dim flicker of vitality, still resident in her, might be altogether quenched. She was alive, that was all—but too listless, too spent and weary to raise her eyelids or turn her head.

He fanned her without speaking for a while. Her hair floating out and upward, caught by the passing and repassing draught, revealed in so doing the hollowness of her temples and thinness of her neck. And this upward wafting of her hair was the only visible sign of life, her breathing being hardly perceptible.

Sarah Watson had gone into the night nursery, leaving the door ajar. She could not watch the two—Damaris, the child who, even while loving it with the whole strength of her motherhood, she—so in moments of self-scrutiny she miserably feared—had betrayed by suppression of that which she believed to be the truth; and Charles Verity, her master and sometime saviour, to her the anointed of the Lord who it was her highest privilege to serve.

Standing stock-still in the stifling darkness of the inner room—a darkness lit now and again by glancing reflections of flame on mirror and window-glass—hearing faint echoes of tumult, shouting of men and cries of helpless, frenzied beasts, answering tumult arose within her, her natural fanaticism finding expression in terrible images far outstripping the legitimate alarm justified by immediate and actual fact. Her mind rushed on to lurid

conclusions, to tragic climaxes—namely, to an outpouring of dusky multitudes from the red-walled native city, invisible now, but ceaselessly frowning there across the Maidan, a storming of this, the pleasure palace of the former rulers of their race, to assault, murder, loot—she herself and these two beings dearest to her, father and child, put to the sword, joined indissolubly to her in some harsh violence of death.

Her spirit sprang to the conception, reckless, lawless, fiercely exultant indeed, while Biblical phrases, half prayer, half defiant denunciation, came to her lips.

"The heathen rage together. They lay waste the inheritance of thy saints. Neither upon the king, in his strength, nor upon the babe at the breast, nor upon the weaned child have they shown mercy. Behold, they kill and spare not. They have torn down and rooted up, they have slain her inhabitants within her, and made Jerusalem a heap of stones. Even so, Lord, come—come—it is best."

But here Colonel Verity's voice, calm, compelling, though charged with a tenderness of appeal to her almost unendurable, struck across her incoherent fury of supplication.

"Damaris," he said, "listen to me, listen and try to understand. You are unkind, my dear, and perverse. You hurt me. Yes—that's better," as the child moved slightly, stimulated by his nearness, his concentration of purpose. "Look at me, Damaris. Yes, like that. Keep on looking, and try to understand. I must go out, go away from you for a time to-night, go into danger—very great danger perhaps. But, before I go, try to tell me what it is you want—what I can do, or give you, which would make you well, make you happy again? Do not continue to be unkind, or perverse—but try to tell me, my dear, what is the matter, what it is you want?"

With a sigh and effort, as of one who lifts an overpowering weight, Damaris opened her eyes, fixed them

on him, a world of doubt, of question, almost of austerity in her glance.

"Does you really mean all that for true, Commissioner Sahib?" she said.

"God is my witness, I mean it truly," he answered solemnly, speaking as to an equal, as to one of his own age and rank; holding her attention, her recovered intelligence, meanwhile, by the whole magnetism of his personality and power of his will.

"I want to talk to Carteret Sahib." Then she added, with a lapse into apparent babyishness: "You see, I haven't anybody to send to tell him now my little effalent is broke."

Colonel Verity spoke again, tenderly as before, yet with hesitancy, as though perplexed.

"Carteret may be here quite soon—to-morrow or even possibly to-night. He and I have business to transact. But why do you want to talk to Carteret rather than to me?—Yes, look at me—still—like that. Why can't you tell me as I ask you? You hurt me, Damaris. Try to tell me now, my dear, before I go out."

Again he put forth all his will-power, at once stimulating her and compelling obedience, slowly fanning her meanwhile with the palm-leaf fan, her hair stirred gently by the recurrent draught. And Sarah Watson, listening in the stifling darkness of the inner room, backed a little, supporting herself against the foot-rail of the bed. She knew by instinct what was coming. Brown heathen hands at her throat and a knife in her heart would have been less painful; but the Almighty had a less easy Way of the Cross than that for her to tread.

"I can't tell you 'cause you'll mind, and it's very selfin' to make you mind," Damaris argued, gently, reasonably. "Nannie minds too, different to your sort of minding, but dreadful much. So there isn't nobody I can tell 'cept Carteret Sahib what brought me my darling little birthday box."

The quiet rhythmical movement of the palm-leaf fan stopped off short. Charles Verity jerked back his head with the action of a hawk about to strike, his face lean and cruel, his beauty very great. And Damaris looked at him undismayed, fearlessly, steadfastly, with a pride imperious as his own; while, pressing her open hands down on the sofa mattress on either side her narrow little body, she drew herself up into a sitting posture.

"Yes, I didn't want to tell you, Commissioner Sahib, 'cause I knew you'd mind; but he talked about her when he brought me my box. She didn't not forget, you see, 'cause she put me her love. I want to hear about Henrietta again. If I could see her again I would be happy like I used to be before my little effalant was spoilt. I'd be quite good, 'deed all the time I'd be quite wonderful good."

But, under the surprise of his own emotion, Charles Verity ceased to concentrate his will upon the sick child. That stimulus removed, the limit of her pitiful store of nervous energy was soon reached. Her eyelids fluttered and closed. Her arms gave, her hands slipping along the sofa cover, so that she sank back, her head rolling sideways upon the pillow, the muscles of her neck and limbs incapable of further effort, flaccid and relaxed.

Just then a great wind rushed down the arcaded gallery without, a new note in it, hollow, booming, full-throated; and there came a mighty drumming of rain on the roof as, with the roar of deluge, the monsoon broke.

Charles Verity listened for a little space, his head still raised. The temperature was not lowered to any appreciable extent; but already the smell and taste of wet, sweeping in between the slats of the bolted shutters, began to penetrate the air, bringing foretaste of alleviation and relief.

Unconsciously he snuffed the moisture, breathing long and deep, filling his lungs with it. And, so doing, his attitude changed. He bowed himself together, his left elbow on his knee, his chin in the palm of his hand, his

right arm hanging at his side, while he still grasped the handle of the palm-leaf fan. There was no longer cause for haste. The Cantonments and Civil Lines alike were safe as far as any spread of fire went. Nothing could burn with the windows of heaven opened thus.—This fact held the background of his thought. The foreground was otherwise occupied. Whether through the blow of Damaris' innocent yet daring declaration, whether through memories raised by this sudden refreshment of rain and of damp, he did not know, but Lesbia Faircloth, Henrietta, Agnes Hackwood, his wife, and again Henrietta—not they only, but light loves of a day, sordid loves of a night—all the women with whom he had dealt in any fashion—even Imogen Hobday, voluptuous, opulent of contour, even Sarah Watson, grey, subservient shadow—passed before him, marshalled, as it seemed, by some foreign alien influence which pushed upon him, exciting, soliciting, provoking passion actually now and here. The palm-leaf fan had slipped from his hand on to the floor. Yet he saw Damaris' hair, caught upward, lifted as by a recurrent draught.

A knocking on the nursery door and Charles Verity started up.

"Watson," he called sharply, "come to Miss Damaris. Come at once."

He went across the room, his hands outstretched as though forcing some visible, tangible and very monstrous thing away from him.

On the corridor, immediately without, stood the gallant, ruffling figure of Ismail Ali; and a couple of paces behind, the wet shining in the lamplight upon the shoulders of his riding jacket, that of Carteret.

"My lord is here," Ismail Ali said, with a fine gesture, bringing his hand up to his green turban at the salute.

"What is wrong? My God, what has happened?" Carteret exclaimed, stricken with amazement, for Charles Verity staggered, his face terrible, yet beautiful as of

one who after bitter warfare resists the evil, chooses the good, his hands still outstretched as though forcing something back and away from him. "What has happened? I hear Damaris is ill?—She is not dead?"

"No, not yet—you have come in time. But sick unto death." Charles Verity mastered himself. "And of a disease which apparently runs in our blood. So naturally I am helpless. You alone, so she says, have means to cure it."

"Your friendship is more to me than that of any man living"—Carteret answered, still amazed, a little carried out of himself. "I am yours to command, Verity. Only tell me how I can help."

"By going to Delhi, and bringing Mrs. Pereira back here with you. Tell her in the words of Scripture, to 'come down ere my child die.' Tell her this, too, she can come without fear of importunity, or of any inconvenient propositions on my part. That she sacrifice her time and pleasures to take this journey and, by taking it, save Damaris, is all I ask or ever shall ask of her."

He put his arm within Carteret's, leading him along the gallery to the stairhead.

"Come and change, and eat," he said. "The law of hospitality must not be broken. Then be good enough to talk to the child—promise her you will do that which I have just asked you.—I must get her away to England as soon as she is equal to travelling.—Myself?—Yes, I have made my decision. I resign the Commissionership. I accept the offer from Cabul.—And—this for Henrietta Pereira, should you care to report it—it may act as an inducement, as a sedative, as—well—delicate flattery to her self-esteem—if the child's life is granted me, as an act at once of thanksgiving and of expiation, I have sworn, God helping me, never again to touch a woman; but cast out the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, from this day forward to the end."

He turned and beckoned Ismail Ali to draw near.

"My friend," he said, "I leave the Sultan-i-bagh. I take service elsewhere—beyond the mountains in Afghanistan."

"I go with my lord.—But what is the purpose of my lord's going, peace or war?"

"War," Colonel Verity said.

"Allah be praised!" Ismail Ali answered.—"For all is well, since the purpose of my lord's going is war."

THE END

